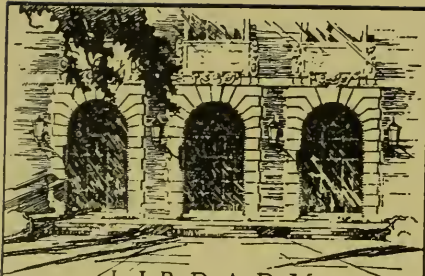


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A COMEDY OF MASKS

A NOVEL

BY

ERNEST DOWSON

AND

ARTHUR MOORE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1893

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A COMEDY OF MASKS

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHARLES SYLVESTER was a man of a somewhat austere punctuality, and there were few of his habits in which he took a juster pride than in the immemorial regularity with which he distributed the first few hours of his day. To rise at half-past seven, whatever might be the state of the temperature or the condition of the air ; to reach the breakfast-room on the stroke of eight, and to devote half an hour to the perusal of the *Times* and of his more inti-

mate correspondence—of course, there were certain letters which he reserved until his arrival in chambers—while he discussed a moderate breakfast which seldom varied; to ride in the Row for another half-hour; and finally, having delivered his horse to a groom, who met him at the corner of Park Lane, to enter the precincts of the Temple, after a brisk walk through Piccadilly and the Strand, shortly after ten—these were infallible articles in his somewhat rigid creed.

Mrs. Sylvester, therefore, was struck with all the surprise which results from an unprecedented breach of custom when, descending to breakfast at her own laxer hour one dark morning in February, she found her son still presiding at the table, absorbed in his letters. He pushed aside these and a packet of telegram forms as she entered, and, rising to accept her dis-

creet kiss, responded to her implicit inquiry as to whether anything was wrong—her eyes had strayed involuntarily to the clock—by pointing her attention to a paragraph in the morning paper. His manner was more solemn than usual; it betrayed an undercurrent of suppressed excitement.

‘This is unusual,’ he remarked; ‘but, you see, I have an excuse.’

She followed the direction of his finger: ‘Death of the Member for North Mallow.’ The cream of the news was contained for her in the heading, and so she did not read the rest of the notice, which was a short one.

Now, North Mallow was the respectable constituency in which a coalition of two parties had selected Mr. Sylvester to be their candidate at the next election, which this death had transferred into the immediate present.

‘My dear boy!’ said Mrs. Sylvester sympathetically.

Then she checked herself, recognising that a too open satisfaction in the event—opportune as it might be—would be hardly decent.

‘Of course, it is very sad for him, poor man!’ she remarked. ‘But I cannot help feeling glad that you should be in the House, and so much sooner than we expected.’

He interrupted her with another discreet embrace.

‘My dear boy!’ she said again vaguely, contentedly, as she poured herself a cup of tea.

‘He has been in bad health for some time,’ continued Charles. ‘He died two days ago at Cannes. It is astonishing that I did not hear the news before. I have wired to Hutchins, my election agent, and

if I can manage it, I shall run down to Mallow. Of course one is sorry, but since it has been ordered so, after all, one has to think of the party.'

'Ah yes, the party,' murmured Mrs. Sylvester sympathetically ; 'of course, that is the great thing. I am sure you will distinguish yourself. I suppose there is no danger of a defeat?'

'Oh, it is a safe seat! But one has always to canvass ; there is always a certain risk. I sometimes wish——' He stopped short and pulled nervously at his collar, finding it a little difficult to express his meaning. 'I think,' he went on at last with a visible effort, flushing somewhat, 'that I must marry. An intelligent woman devoted to my interests would be of great service to me now.'

Mrs. Sylvester allowed her eyes to remain in discreet observation of the tablecloth.

‘I have often thought so,’ she said at last quietly.

‘Indeed!’ he remarked politely. ‘Yes; it is a matter, perhaps, which I should have discussed with you before. I am fully aware of the right you have—— I would not, I mean, have failed——’

‘Oh, my son!’ she protested, ‘I am sure you have always been most correct.’

‘I have tried to be,’ he said simply. ‘If I have said nothing to you, it has been because I wished to be cautious, not to commit myself, to be very sure——’

‘Of the lady’s affection, do you mean?’

‘Ah, can one ever be sure of that? No; I mean rather of my own attitude, of my own situation. It has always seemed to me that marriage is a very great undertaking, a thing to be immensely considered, not to be embarked on rashly.’

‘You view everything so justly!’ she

exclaimed. 'Have you—am I to understand that you have a particular person in view?'

He waived aside the compliment with a bland gesture, which asserted that only his magnanimity prevented him from acknowledging its truth.

'Surely, surely!' he said. 'You, are perhaps aware how immensely I admire Miss Masters; that I have paid her very great attention—marked attention, I may say?'

'I observed something of the kind at Lucerne. I did not know if it had continued; sometimes I thought so. Have you proposed to her?'

'No,' he said slowly; 'I have not yet proposed to her. Naturally, I wished to consult you first.'

'I am sure, Charles,' said his mother cheerfully, 'that I shall be extremely

pleased. She is a very nice girl. She is a great-niece of Lord Hazelbury, and connected with the Marshes, and I know she will have at least sixty thousand pounds.'

He glanced across at her, frowning a little, with a certain irritation.

'I shall not marry her for her money,' he said.

'My dear boy,' she retaliated, 'I did not suppose you would be mercenary; only, a little money is very desirable; and Lady Garnett has a great deal, and Mary will certainly get her share of it.'

'Ah, I don't like her,' put in Charles inconsequently; 'she is a profane old woman.'

'Neither do I; but one must accept her. And Mary, after all, is only her niece.'

'She has a beautiful character,' he continued slowly. (This time he was not

speaking of Lady Garnett.) ‘I admire it more than I can say ; it has very great depths.’

His mother looked up at him quickly, struck by his strenuous accent, for which she was scarcely prepared. She had a high notion of his character, of his ability, and was pleased, more pleased than she cared to admit, at the suitability of the match. He had always been an excellent, even a sympathetic son ; and it had been part of his excellence that whenever he should marry, she had been quite certain that he would marry like this, selecting with dignity a young woman whom one could emphatically approve—a testimony to his constancy in certain definite traditions in which he had been reared, traditions, it may be said, which he adhered to with a tenacity that even exceeded her own.

It had never entered into her calculations, however, to look upon him as an ardent lover, and yet it was as an ardent lover that he had just spoken. She recognised the tone.

And, strangely enough, for the moment it happened to touch her, to give her an increased interest in the affair, though afterwards she could reflect that in a man of Charles' character, so soberly practical and mature, it was perhaps a trifle incongruous, and, at the best, not precisely the tone by which women are most likely to be won.

She said placidly :

‘ I hope you will succeed. If you take my advice, you will speak at once.’

‘ I had meant to take the first occasion,’ he said.

‘ Ah, my dear,’ she put in, ‘ you had better make one yourself.’

Charles simply smiled. Her approbation of his views, and the unwonted dissipation of a prolonged and indolent breakfast, together with the pleasant excitement of shortly taking the political field, had rendered him singularly mild.

He remembered that he was invited that night to a dance of some magnitude, at a house big enough for privacy to be easily secured, and where Mary would certainly be.

‘Perhaps I will,’ he said, gathering up his voluminous papers as he prepared for departure, ‘this evening.’

He was still in the same mood of cheerful resolution when, after an exceptionally busy day, which had also ministered in an exceptional degree to his self-esteem (it had included an interview with one of the whips of his party, as well as a satisfactory conversation with his agent on the temper

of the constituency whose member was so seasonably deceased), he had dressed at his club, and dawdled at his accustomed table in the large bright room over a solitary dinner.

His head had been very full of his political ambitions, into which the image of Miss Masters had not inconveniently intruded. He had eminently that orderly faculty of detachment which allows a man to separate and disconnect the various interests of his life, admitting each only in its due order and place ; but none the less had he been conscious all along that somewhere in the background of his mind her image subsisted, and now that he was at leisure again to give her that place of honour in his consideration which she had long been insensibly acquiring, he was more than ever determined to do all that lay in his power to make her his wife.

It amazed him almost that he had not put the important question long before, so vital and inevitable had it become ; and he scarcely considered, in his curious egoism, his scant acquaintance with the subtilty of a woman's mind, how much Mary herself might have contributed to the delay by her careful avoidance of intimate topics, by the cloak of elaborate indifference in which she had wrapped herself whenever she had not been able to avoid being alone with him ; so that, however much he had desired it, he could never, without doing her gross violence, have succeeded in striking the precisely right personal note.

To-night, however, there should be no more fencing ; of that he was thoroughly resolved. He would be eloquent and sustained, impassioned, and, if necessary, humble—but, above all, perfectly direct ; he would brook no faltering, feminine

evasions ; would insist on an answer, and on a right answer too, pointing out, with the close reasoning acquired in his profession, the superb propriety of the match. And he believed that she would be convinced. Was it not half of her attraction that she was a woman of intelligence, not a silly school-girl, who flitted and danced ?

In spite of his self-esteem, however, he was not unwise enough to feel sure of the result. Were not all women, even the best of them, notoriously perverse ? And there was always, conceivably, that inopportune third party, a preferred rival, to be counted with, who might have been first on the field.

Considering these things, he allowed himself a glass of chartreuse with his coffee, and the unwonted luxury of a cigar, over which he lingered, growing more

nervous as its white ash lengthened and the occasion drew near. Yet he could remind himself at last that—at any rate, to his knowledge—there was no one else whose pretensions the lady preferred, since Rainham, the man whom he had marked as dangerous, was socially damned, and no longer to be feared.

It was very nearly eleven before he reached the house to which he had been invited, and where he found a very brilliant party already in progress. The house was chiefly a legal and political one, although there seemed to be a fair leaven of literary and artistic celebrities among the more solid reputations; and for some time he was engrossed by various of his Parliamentary acquaintances, who questioned and encouraged him. Two or three had newly arrived from the House, where an important division had just been declared;

and Charles listened with some impatience to their account of it, gazing absently, over their heads, at the maze of pretty toilettes, which made an agreeable *frou-frou* over the polished floor, although the debate had been upon a question in which he was warmly interested.

He escaped from them at last with a murmured apology, an intimation that he wished to find somebody, and made his way slowly into the adjoining room, from which the strains of waltz music floated in, and where they danced. His friends found his demeanour noticeable, and were inclined to wonder with some amusement, knowing his habitual equanimity, that the vacancy at North Mallow should have undermined it. When he entered the ball-room he stopped for a moment, flushing a little. The first person he had seen, between the heads of the floating couples, was Lady

Garnett, on a little raised seat at the further end of the large room, engaged in an animated conversation with an ambassador. He realized quickly that she would not have come alone.

He waited until the music ceased and the dispersal of the dancers made the passage of the floor practicable; then he set off in her direction, trusting that he might find her niece in the vicinity. Half-way down he stopped again; he had recognised his sister, who fanned herself languidly, seated on one of two chairs partially concealed by a great mass of exotic shrubbery, in pots, which formed almost an alcove. She removed her long soft skirt, which she had thrown over the vacant seat, as he approached; and at this tacit invitation he accepted it.

‘Only until the rightful owner comes,’ he explained. ‘But I see you so seldom

now that I must not lose this chance. I suppose you are keeping it for someone ?'

'It is for Miss Masters,' said Mrs. Lightmark ; 'but she won't want it yet. She has just gone down to supper.'

'Ah, so much the better. I want to see her.'

'Do you ?' she asked indifferently. 'Well, you had better keep me company until she comes. It is a long time since I saw you.'

He considered her for a moment with a heavy, fraternal appreciation.

'Yes,' he said—'yes, it is a long time, Eve. But, of course, we have each our own occupations, our own duties now. And being the wife of a successful painter must involve almost as many as being—if I may say so—a fairly successful barrister. Gratified as we are, my dear—my mother and I—at the success of your marriage,

which has proved more brilliant even than we hoped, I must say that we often regret having lost you. We are duller people, I fear, since you have left us. However, we can still think of the old days, as you, no doubt, do sometimes.'

She gave a faint little elusive smile, behind her fan.

'Oh, I am afraid I have forgotten them,' she said. Then she went on quickly, before he had time to reply: 'Another thing, too, I had almost forgotten—to congratulate you—on Mr. Humphrey's death.'

'My dear Eve!' He looked at her with some reproof, with an air of finding her a little crude. 'You should not say such things, Eve! I deeply deplore——'

'Shouldn't I?' she asked flippantly. 'Dick told me you were to succeed to his seat. Isn't it true?'

He ignored her question—busied himself

with an obdurate button on his glove. She watched him over her fan, half smiling, with her brilliant eyes.

‘You are cynical,’ he remarked at last. ‘I dare say I shall get in. Is Lightmark here?’

‘Yes, he is here. He has taken Mrs. Van der Gucht—the American Petroleum Queen they call her, don’t they?—down to supper. She wants him to paint her portrait, at his own price. He will be here to fetch me at half-past eleven. I believe we have to move on then.’

‘Move on?’ he asked, with an air of mystification.

‘Show ourselves at another house,’ she replied. ‘It’s a convenient practice, you know; one gets two advertisements in one night. Besides, one saves one’s self a little that way; one sometimes gets an evening off.’

‘ You talk as if you were an actress,’ he said, with offended irony. ‘ I don’t understand your tone. Does Miss Masters accompany you ?’

‘ I think not. Did you say you wanted to see her ?’

‘ Particularly ; it is chiefly for that I am here.’

‘ She is a very nice girl,’ remarked his sister gently. ‘ I hope——’ She hesitated slightly ; then held out her hand to him, which involuntarily he clasped. ‘ I hope you will have a satisfactory conversation, Charles.’

He glanced at her for a moment silently, feeling a secret pleasure in her discrimination.

‘ You look very well,’ he said at last, ‘ only rather tired. That is a very pretty dress.’

She smiled vaguely.

‘ I didn’t know you ever noticed dresses.

Yes, I am rather tired. Ah, there is Mary—and Dick.'

The girl came towards them at this moment, looking pretty and distinguished in her square-cut, dark gown ; and Light-mark followed, carrying her bouquet of great yellow roses, which he held appreciatively under his nose.

He nodded to Charles Sylvester, who was shaking hands with Mary ; then he turned to his wife.

'If you are ready, dear,' he said lightly, 'I expect the carriage is. Miss Masters, you know we have another dance to do. My brother-in-law will see after you and your bouquet, if you will allow me.'

'Oh, give it me, please,' cried the girl, with a nervous laugh. 'I really did not know you were carrying it. Thanks so much.'

She had succeeded almost mechanically

to Mrs. Lightmark's vacated chair ; and as she sat there, with her big nosegay on her lap, he was struck by her extreme pallor, the lassitude in her fine eyes. He ventured to remark on it, when the other two had left them, and she had not made, as he had feared and half anticipated, any motion to rise.

‘ Yes, the rooms are hot and dreadfully full. There are too many sweet-smelling flowers about ; they make one faint. It's a relief to sit down in comparative quiet and calm for a little.’

He was emboldened by her quiescence to resume his chair at her side.

‘ I won't ask you to dance, then,’ he said ; ‘ and allow me to hope that no one else has done so.’

She glanced indifferently at her card.

‘ No. 10,’ he added anxiously ; ‘ a waltz, after the Lancers.’

‘I see some vague initials,’ she said; ‘but probably my partner will not be able to find me, thanks to these shrubs.’

‘I hope not, with all my heart,’ said Charles devoutly. ‘At any rate, I can sit with you until you are claimed.’

‘As you like,’ she replied wearily. ‘Are you not anxious to dance?’

‘I am not a great dancer at any time,’ he protested; ‘and to-night my heart would be particularly out of it. I came for another purpose.’

He spoke tensely, and there was a slight tremor in his voice, ordinarily so clear and dogmatic, which alarmed the girl, so that she forgot her weariness and meditated a retreat.

‘Oh, so did I,’ she replied with forced gaiety. ‘I came to look after my aunt, which reminds me this is hardly the way to do it. Will you please take me to her?’

‘I assure you she does not want you,’ cried Charles eagerly. ‘I saw her not ten minutes ago with M. de Loudéac. They seemed to be talking most intimately.’

‘He is an old friend,’ said Mary; ‘but, still, they may have finished by this time. One can say a great deal in ten minutes.’

‘Ah!’ he put in quickly, ‘only give me them, Miss Masters.’

‘I really think it is unnecessary,’ she murmured with a rapid flush. She made another movement, as if she would rise, dropping her bouquet in her haste to prevent his speech. He picked it up quickly and replaced it in her hands.

‘No, don’t go, Miss Masters,’ he insisted. ‘I surely have a right to be heard. After all, I do not require ten minutes, nor five. Only I came to say——’

‘Ah, don’t say it, Mr. Sylvester,’ she pleaded. ‘What is the good?’

‘I mean that I love you! I want you immensely to be my wife.’

She bent her head over her flowers, so that her eyes were quite hidden, and he could not see that they were full of tears; and for a long time there was silence, in which Sylvester’s foot kept time nervously with the music. The girl bitterly reproached her tiredness, which had dulled apprehension so far that she had not realized at once the danger of the situation, nor retreated while there was yet time. She had always dreaded this; and now that it was accomplished, an illimitable vista of the disagreeable consequences broadened out before her. The ice being once broken, however she might answer him now, a repetition, perhaps even several, could scarcely be avoided; she

foresaw that his persistence would be immense, so that with whatsoever finality she might refuse him, it would all be to go over again. And with it all was joined her natural reluctance to give an honest gentleman pain, only heightened by her sense that, for the first time in her knowledge of the man, the evident sincerity of his purpose had given simplicity to his speech. He for once had been neither formal nor absurd, and the uniqueness of the fact, taken in conjunction with her share in it, seemed to have given him a claim on her consideration. He had cast aside the armour of self-conceit at which she could have thrown a dart without remorse, and the man seeming so defenceless, she had a desire to deal gently with him.

‘Mr. Sylvester,’ she said at last, looking up at him, ‘I am so sorry, but please do

not speak of this any more. Believe me, it is quite impossible. I am sensible of the honour you do me, deeply sensible, only it is impossible. Let us forget this —this mistake, and be better friends than we have ever been before.'

'Ah, Mary,' he broke out, 'you must not answer me like that, without consideration. Why should it be impossible?'

'Forgive me,' she said gently; 'only I am tired now. And consideration would not alter it. Let me go.'

He put one hand out, detaining her, and she sank back again wearily on her chair.

'If you are tired, so much the more reason that you should hear me. You will not be tired if you marry me. If you are tired, it is because your life has no great interests: it's frivolous; it is

dribbled away on little things. You don't really care for it—you are too good for it—the sort of life you lead.'

'The sort of life I lead?'

'The ideals of your set, of the people who surround your aunt, of your aunt herself. The whole thing is barren.'

'Are we more frivolous than the rest?' she asked suddenly.

'You are better than the rest,' he said promptly. 'That is why I want you to marry me. You were made for great interests—for a large scene.'

'What are they—your great interests, your ideals?' she asked presently. 'How are they so much better than ours?—though I don't know what ours may be.'

'If you marry me, you will find out,' he said. 'Oh, you shall have them, I promise you that! I want you im-

mensely, Mary! I am just going into public life, I mean to go far—and if I have your support, your sympathy, if you become my wife, I shall go much farther. And I want to take you away from all this littleness, and put you where you can be felt, where your character—I can't say how I admire it—may have scope.'

'I am sorry,' she said again; 'you are very good, and you do me great honour: but I can only answer as before—it is not possible.'

'Ah, but you give no reason!' he cried.
'There is no reason.'

'Is it not a good enough one that I do not love you?' said the girl.

'Only marry me,' he persisted, 'and that will come. I don't want to hurry you, you know. I would rather you would take time and consider; give me your answer in a week or two's time.'

They were silent for a little; Sylvester was now perfectly composed: his own agitation seemed to have communicated itself to the girl, whom he watched intently, with his bland, impartial gaze. She had closed her eyes, was resting her chin on her bouquet, and appeared to be deeply meditating his words. She looked up at last with a little shiver.

‘I am very tired,’ she said. ‘If I promise to think over what you have said to-night and to give you my answer in a month’s time, will you try and find Lady Garnett for me now?’

‘Ah, Miss Masters—Mary!’ he said, ‘that is all I want.’

‘And in the meantime,’ she pursued gently, ‘to allow the subject to drop?’

‘You must make your own terms,’ he said; ‘but surely I may come and see you?’

‘Very well,’ she consented, after a moment; ‘if it gives you any pleasure, you may come.’

At which Charles simply took her cold, irresponsible hand in his own, with a silent pressure. Irresponsible as it was, however, he reminded himself, she had made no effective protest against the gesture.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AT Lady Day, when the negotiations for the sale of his unprofitable riverside domain were finally concluded, Rainham scarcely regretted to find that an ample margin had been left before the new company took possession; and he had still several months, during which he might remain in occupation of his old habitation, and arrange leisurely for the subsequent disposition of his books and more intimate personal chattels. The dilapidated old house was to be pulled down by the new owners (the plans for an extensive warehouse, to be erected on

the site of it, were already in the hands of the builders), and this also was a fact from which Rainham derived a certain satisfaction.

Insensibly, the spot had discovered a charm for him: the few rooms, which had been his for so long, although, actually, so small a proportion of his days had been spent in them, had gradually taken the impress of his personality—the faded carpets, the familiar grouping of pictures and books, the very shape of the apartment, and the discoloured paper on the walls, expressed him in a way that certainly no other abiding place, which might conceivably await him, could ever do. And he took a dreary pleasure in the consideration that, after he had gone, the rooms would know no other occupant; that from the glazed and barred windows of the dreary

building which was to take the place of the quaint old house, when it was levelled to the ground, no person would ever gaze out, exactly as he had done, at the white and melancholy river; in which, as he said to himself fantastically, he had cast, one by one, as the days lengthened, his interests, his passions, his desires.

Years before, by an accident of inheritance, he had come into the property with an immense antipathy: a white elephant that would bring him neither profit nor honour, but which the modest competence that he had previously enjoyed did not allow him to refuse. It had altered the tenor of his existence, destroyed his youth and his ambitions, and represented for many years, more completely than anything else, the element of failure which had run through his life.

And, after all, now that deliverance was at hand, he was by no means jubilant. In escaping from this thralldom of so many years, he felt something of the chagrin with which a man witnesses the removal of some long-cherished and inveterate grievance; the more so, in that he could now remind himself impartially how small it had been, how little, after all, he had allowed it to weigh upon him. In effect, had he not always done very much as he liked, lived half his time abroad in his preferred places, chosen his own friends, and followed his own tastes without greatly considering his inherited occupation? He must look deeper than that, he reflected, within himself, or into the nature of things themselves, actually to seize and define that curious flaw which had made life seem to him at last (from what wearied psychologist, read long ago and half for-

gotten, did he cull the phrase?) ‘a long disease of the spirit.’

For appreciations of this kind, he had, nowadays, ample leisure ; and unprofitable as it appeared (he did not even pretend to himself that it would lead anywhere, since what faint illumination he might strike from it could only refer to the past), he was seldom tired of searching for them.

A hard March, cited generally as the coldest within the memory of a generation, following a winter of fog and rain, had made him an inveterate prisoner within the four walls of his apartment. He had, indeed, the run of others at this time, for the Bullens had left him (at the last there had been no question of little Margot’s appropriation ; Rainham had taken it so serenely for granted that she would remain with him), but this was a privilege of which he did not avail himself. And the

place, stripped of all its commercial attributes, had fallen into an immense desuetude, to which the charm of silence, and of a deeper solitude than it had ever possessed before, was attached.

The dock gates were finally closed ; a hard frost of many days' duration had almost hermetically sealed them, and the drip of Thames water through the sluices formed immediately into long, fantastic stalactites of clear ice. Rainham found it difficult to believe, at times, that the bustle of the wharves, the roar of maritime London, still went on at his elbows, the deserted yard cast such a panoply of silence round him. It was as though he had fallen suddenly from the midst of men into some wholly abandoned region, a land of perpetual snows. It symbolized well for him the fantastic separation which he had suffered from the rest of the world ;

so that, but for the painter Oswyn, who was a constant visitor, and had, indeed, since the departure of the Bullens, a room set apart for him in the house, he might have been already dead and buried, and his old life would not have seemed more remote. And if he found the atmosphere of Blackpool, more often than not, to be of soothing quality, or at least a harmonious setting to the long and aimless course of introspection on which he had embarked, there were also times when it had a certain terror for him.

It came upon him in the evening, as a rule, when Margot had been carried away to bed by the hard-featured old woman who had succeeded Mrs. Bullen in the superintendence of his household ; for the child, with her sweet, shrill voice and her infantile chatter, had come to seem to him far more even than Oswyn, about whom

there would always lurk something shadowy and unreal, a last link with the living ; when the tide was nearly out, so that the stillness was not even broken by the long, lugubrious siren of a passing steamer, his isolation was borne in upon him with something of the sting of sharp physical pain.

The dark old room, with its mildewing wainscot, became full of ghosts ; and he could fancy that the spirits of his ancestors were returned from the other side of Styx to finger the pages of by-gone ledgers, and to mock from between the shadows of his incongruous bookshelves at their degenerate descendant. And these did but give place, amid strange creaking and contortions of the decaying walls, to spectres more intimate, whose reprobation moved him more : the faces of many persons whom he had known forming themselves,

with extraordinary vividness, out of the darkness, and in the red embers of the fire, and each adding its item of particular scorn to the round accusation of futility brought by the rest. They were part of his introspection, all those—he was not sick enough to hold them real—but nevertheless they gave him food for much vigilant thought, which came back always to the great interest of his life. Futility! Did she too, the beloved woman, point an accusing finger, casting back at him a sacrifice which, certainly, in his then disability, seemed to him vain enough? For all his goodwill, had he gained any more for her than a short respite, the temporal reconstruction of a fading illusion?—and at what a price! The irony of things was just then so present to him that he could readily believe he had done no more than that—enough merely to embitter her

knowledge, when it should finally come. And an old saying of Lady Garnett's returned to him, which, at the time, he had disputed, but which struck him now with the sharp stab of an intimate truth. 'You could have prevented it, had you wished.' Yes, he might have prevented it, if only he had foreseen ; the wise old woman had not made a mistake. And yet he had wished to prevent it, in a manner, only his colder second thoughts—he made no allowance now for their generous intention—had found propriety in the match, and his long habit of spectatorship had made the personal effort, which interference would have involved, impossible.

Harking back scrupulously to the remote days of Eve's girlhood, his morbid recollection collected a variety of scattered threads, of dispersed signs and tokens, which led him to ask at last, with a gathering

dread, whether he had not made a mistake, must not plead guilty to a charge of malingering, or, at least, of intellectual cowardice in acquiescing so supinely in defeat?

Was it true, then, that a man found in life very much what he brought to the search?

Certainly, the world was full of persons who had been broken on the wheel for their proper audacity, because they had sought so much more than was to be found; but might it not be equally true that one could err on the other side, expect, desire too little, less even than was there, and so reap finally, as he had done, in an immense lassitude and disgust of all things, born neither of satiety nor of disappointment, the full measure of one's reward? Perhaps success in the difficult art of life depended, almost as

much as in the plastic arts, upon conviction, upon the personal enthusiasm which one brought to bear upon its conduct, and was never really compatible with that attitude of half-disdainful toleration which he had so early acquired.

Yet that was a confession of failure he was loath to make, or admit that he had been too much afraid of high passions and great affairs, had been fastidious and reserved only to dissipate his life on whims and small interests—those seemed to him now too great refusals to be contemplated without regret. His depression had reached its lowest pitch when he had asked himself whether in love, as in life, his error might not have been the same; and his passion, like the rest, a thing without conviction, and thereby foredoomed to fail. And it was a sensible alleviation of his mood when he could

answer this question finally with a firm negative.

Certainly, his vain desire for her personal presence, for the consolation of her voice and eyes, was with him always, like the ache of physical hunger or thirst—the one thing real in a world of shadows.

Reaching this point one night, and relapsing, as was his wont, into a vaguer mood of reminiscence, not wholly unpleasant, which the darkness of the quiet room, lit only by the fire of logs, turned at last into drowsiness, he looked up presently, with a sudden start, to find Oswyn standing over him.

‘I am sorry,’ said the painter; ‘I am afraid I have awaked you. The room was so dark that I imagined you had gone to bed. I came to warm myself before turning in.’

Rainham shifted his chair a little, and watched the other as he extended his thin, nervous hands to the glow.

‘Don’t apologize,’ he said; ‘I haven’t so many visitors that I can afford to miss the best of them. Besides, I was only half asleep, or half awake, as you like to look at it.’

‘Oh, look at it!’ cried Oswyn. ‘My dear fellow, I don’t, and won’t.’

He pointed his words, which Rainham found meaningless enough, with an impatient dig of his rusty boot against the fragrant wood, and his friend considered him curiously in the light of the blaze which his gesture had provoked.

‘Is there anything wrong?’ he asked. ‘More wrong than usual, I mean.’

‘As you like to look at it,’ echoed the other; ‘a mare’s-nest—a discovery of the blessed public—oh, but a discovery! Two

or three clever young newspaper men, with a tip from Paris to help them, have made a discovery ; they have unearthed a disreputable painting genius, one Oswyn, and found the inevitable Jew of culture—you know the type, all nose and shekels—to finance their boom. Oh, it's genuine ! I have Mosenthal's letter in my pocket—it was handed me by McAllister—offering his gallery, the pick of Bond Street. Oswyn's Exhibition, with expurgations and reservations, of course, but an exhibition ! Don't you congratulate me ?'

Rainham glanced up at him, smiling ; at last he said whimsically :

'If you don't want me to, of course I won't. But *après*, where's the harm ?'

'Ah, they don't understand,' cried the other quickly, acridly. 'They don't understand.'

He had drawn his chair beside Rain-

ham, and sat with his large, uncouth head propped on one hand, and the latter could perceive that his mouth was twisted with vague irony and some subtile emotion which eluded him.

‘You are the great paradox!’ he sighed at last. ‘For Heaven’s sake, be reasonable! It is a chance, whoever makes it, and you mustn’t miss it, for the sake of a few — the just, the pure, the discreet, who do know good work—as well sa for your own. After all, we are not all gross, and fatuous, and vulgar; there are some of us who know, who care, who make fine distinctions. Consider us!’

‘Consider you?’ cried the other quickly. ‘Ah, *mon gros*, don’t I—more than anything?’

Then he continued in a lighter key :

‘However, I don’t refuse; you take me too literally. It was the last bitter cry of

my spleen. I have put myself in Mosen-thal's hands ; I've sold him two pictures.'

'In that case, then, why am I not to be glad ?'

'Oh, it's success !' said Oswyn. He glanced contemptuously at his frayed shirt-cuff, with the broad stains of paint upon it. 'Be glad, if you like ; I am glad in a way. God knows, I have arrears to make up with the flesh-pots of Egypt. And I have paid my price for it. Oh, I have damnably paid my price !'

Rainham shrugged his shoulders absently.

'Yes, one pays,' he agreed—'one pays, some time or other, to the last penny.'

His friend rose, pushing his chair back impatiently : he had the air of suppressing some fierce emotion, of anxiously seeking self-control. At last he moved over to the black square of window, and stood

with his hands in his pockets, looking out at nothing, at the frosty fantasies which had collected on the glass.

‘If it had come ten years ago,’ he said in a low, constrained voice, ‘ten years ago, in Paris. . . . Oh, man, man!’ he went on bitterly, ‘if you could know, if you could dimly imagine the horrors, the mad, furious horrors, the things I have seen and suffered, since then.’

He pulled himself up sharply, and concluded with a little mirthless laugh, as though he were ashamed of his outburst.

‘You would consume a great deal of raw spirit, to take the taste out of your mouth. And my “Medusa” is to hang for the future in Mr. Mosenthal’s dining-room! Will he understand her, do you think?’

Rainham was silent, wondering at his friend’s departure from his wonted reti-

cence, which, however, scarcely surprised him. He had never sought to penetrate the dark background, against which the painter's solitary figure stood. He was content to accept him as he was ; asking no questions, and hardly forming, even in his own mind, conjectures as to what his previous history and relations might have been. He was not ignorant, indeed, that he was a man who had been in dark places ; it had always seemed possible to account for him on the theory that he lived on the memory of an inextinguishable sorrow.

And now this possibility had received corroboration from his own words, shedding a new light, in which both his character and his genius became more intelligible. He had only stood out of the shadows which obscured him for one instant ; but that instant had been enough.

And Rainham did not find the occasion less valuable, nor the impression which he had received less pitiful, because he believed it to be ultimate and unique; his friend would make no vain, elaborate confidences; he would simply step back into his old obscurity, leaving Rainham with the memory of that instructive cry which had been wrung from him by the irony of tardy recognition, when he had seen him luridly standing over the wreck of his honour and of his life. And with his pity there came to him a fresh sense of the greatness of the painter's work. His genius, so full of suffering, and of the sense of an almost fiendish cruelty in things, was, simply, his life, his experience, his remorse.

With the hand of a master, with the finest technique, which made his work admirable even to persons who misinter-

preted or were revolted by its conception, he rendered the things he had known, so that his art was nothing so much as an expression of his personal pain in life.

In the light of this vision into the bottom of Oswyn's soul, Rainham's own pain seemed suddenly shallow and remote; he had gazed for a moment upon a blacker desolation than any which he could know. He felt a new, a tolerant sympathy towards his friend, and it struck him, not for the first time, but with an increased force, as he reminded himself how his days were bounded, that they had many things which they had still to say, things which must certainly be said.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN the same room one afternoon a fortnight later, Oswyn sat, absently correcting the draft catalogue of his exhibition, when he received an intimation, which for some days he had expected—his friend felt strong enough to see him. He put down his pen, glancing up inquiringly at the bearer of this message, a young woman in the neat, depressing garb of a professional nurse; but for answer she slightly shook her head with the disinterested complacency of the woman used to sickness, who would encourage no false notions.

‘It is only temporary,’ she said with deliberation. ‘I fear there has been no real improvement; the patient is steadily losing strength. Only, he insists on seeing you; and when they are like that, one must give them what they want. I must beg you to excite him as little as possible.’

Oswyn bowed a dreary assent, and followed her up the obscure staircase, which creaked sullenly beneath his tread. And he stood for a few moments in silence, until his eyes were accustomed to the darkened room, when the nurse had gently closed the door behind him, leaving him alone with his friend.

He almost believed, at first, that Rainham must be sleeping, he lay back with such extreme quietness in the large old-fashioned bed. And seeing him there in that new helplessness, he realized, almost

for the first time, how little there was to say or to hope.

He had never, indeed, been ignorant that his friend's hold on life was precarious ; some such scene as this had often been in his mind before ; only, insensibly, Rainham's own jesting attitude towards his disabilities had half imposed on him, and made that possibility appear intangible and remote. But now, in view of the change which the last fortnight had wrought in him, he could cherish no illusions ; the worst that was possible was all now that one could expect. He was a charming, generous, clever fellow, and he was dying ; that was a thing one could not get over.

He moved across to the bedside, and Rainham's eyes suddenly opened. They were immensely large, strangely brilliant ; his face had fallen in, was so white and

long and lean, that these tremendous eyes seemed almost all of the man that was still to be accounted.

Oswyn derived the impression from them that, while his friend's body had been failing, his mind had never been more vigorous; that, during these long nights and days, when he had lain so motionless, in so continued a silence, it had only been because he was thinking with redoubled intensity.

Presently, as Rainham's lips moved slightly, he drew nearer, and bent his head over him.

'Don't talk,' he said nervously, as Rainham appeared to struggle with the difficulty of utterance; 'don't tire yourself. I've only come to look at you. Wait until you are a little stronger.'

Rainham raised his hand impatiently.

'It won't tire me, and tired or not there

are things I must speak of. Is she in the room—the nurse?’

He spoke slowly, and with a visible effort; but his voice, although it scarcely rose above a whisper, and seemed shadowy and far away, was deliberate and distinct. Oswyn shook his head.

‘She has given me half an hour; you must not abuse it. I have promised to keep you quiet. I really believe you are a little better.’

‘I am well enough for what I want—to talk to you. After that, I will be as quiet as you like, for as long as you like. Only I have been keeping myself for this all these last few days that I have lain here like a log, listening to the ticking of that merciless clock. They thought I was sleeping, unconscious, very likely. I have been collecting myself, thinking immensely, waiting for this.

‘I have always been here,’ said the other simply, ‘in case you should send for me. I have been painting Margot. She is a dear little soul; she misses you sadly.’

‘It is of her partly that I must speak. I have left all I can to her. If you will sometimes give her a thought—she is absolutely without belongings. I don’t wish to make it a charge on you, a burden, only sometimes it has struck me lately that you were interested in the child, that you liked her, and I have taken the liberty of making you a sort of guardian. She could live with the Bullens——’

‘Oh, I like her—I like her!’ cried Oswyn, with a short laugh. Then he went on more seriously, half apologetically, as though the other might have found his mirth ill-timed: ‘My dear friend, it is a great honour, a great

pleasure, you give me. I, too, have no belongings, no interests; this might be a great one. I never thought of it before, I must admit; but I will adopt her. She shall live with me, if it's necessary. Only, ah! let us hope still that this may not be necessary, that it is premature.'

The other held up a thin hand deprecatingly.

'Ah, don't let us fence with the truth. I have always seen it coming, and why should I lie about it, now that it is come? When one is as tired as I am, there is only one other thing which happens—one dies. You don't suppose I should have sent for you like this if it hadn't been so?'

He lay very still for a moment or two with his eyes closed, as if the effort which speech cost him was considerable. At last he said abruptly:

‘There are things you should know ; she is Lightmark’s child.’

Oswyn had seated himself on a low chair by the bed ; he kept his head averted, as does a priest who hears confessions ; and he gazed with absent eyes at the fire which burned sulkily, at the row of medicine-bottles on the mantelpiece, at all the dreary paraphernalia of a sick-room.

‘Yes, she is Lightmark’s child,’ continued Rainham ; ‘and the mother was that girl whom we found two years ago—do you remember ?—the night of your first visit here—outside the gates. She called herself Mrs. Crichton. It’s a miserable story ; I only discovered it quite recently.’

Oswyn drew in a deep breath, which sounded like a sigh in the strangely still room.

It did not so much suggest surprise

as the indefinable relief which a man feels when accident permits him to express cognizance of some fact of which he has long been inwardly assured.

‘I knew that long ago,’ he said at last. ‘I suspected it when I first saw the girl ; but I said nothing to you at the time : perhaps I was wrong. Afterwards, when we knew each other better, there seemed no occasion ; I had almost forgotten the episode.’

‘Yes,’ went on the other faintly ; ‘we have all made mistakes—I more than most folk, perhaps.’

Then he asked suddenly :

‘Had you any motive, any reason for your suspicion ?’

‘It was the name Crichton—the man’s pseudonym on the *Outcry*. It flashed across me then that she was after Lightmark. He was just severing his con-

nection with the paper. He had always kept it very close, and I dare say I was one of the few persons who were in the secret. That is why, at the bottom of his heart, he is afraid of me—afraid that I shall bring it up. It's the one thing he is ashamed of.'

'I see, I see,' cried Rainham wearily ;
'the wretched fellow !'

'Dear man, why should we think of him ?' broke in Oswyn ; 'he isn't worth it. Now, of all seasons, can't we find a topic less unsavoury ?'

'You don't understand,' continued Rainham, after a slight pause in his thin, far-away voice. 'I am not thinking of him, or only indirectly. I have found him out, and I should be content enough to forget him if it were possible. Only, unfortunately, he happens to be inextricably entangled with all that is most sacred, most im-

portant to me. It is of his wife—Mrs. Lightmark: do you know her?—that I think.’

Oswyn shook his head.

‘I know her only by sight, as we all do; she is very beautiful.’

‘I don’t mind telling you that I have considered her a great deal—yes, immensely. I should not speak of it—of her—unless I were dying; but, after all, when one is dying, there are things one may say. I have held my peace so long. And since I have been lying here I have had time to ponder it, to have thought it all out. It seems to me that simply for her sake someone should know before—before the occasion passes—just the plain truth. Of course, Sylvester by rights ought to be the man, only I can’t ask him to come to me—there are reasons; and, besides, he is an ass.’

‘Yes, he is an ass,’ admitted Oswyn simply; ‘that is reason enough.’

And just then there flashed into his mind the one notable occasion on which the barrister had run across him, his intriguing letter and the ineffectual visit which had followed it—ineffectual as he had supposed, but which might nevertheless, he reflected now, have had its results, ironical and inopportune enough. It was a memory of no importance, and yet it seemed just then to be the last of a long train of small lights that led to a whole torch of illumination, in which the existence of little Margot and her quaint juxtaposition with his friend, which in his general easy attitude towards the fantastic he had not troubled to investigate, was amply and generously justified. He turned round suddenly, and caught his friend’s thin hand, which he held.

‘Ah, don’t trouble to explain, to make me understand,’ he murmured. ‘It’s enough that I understand you have done something very fine, that you are the most generous of men.’

Rainham was silent for a moment : he had no longer the physical capacity of smiling ; but there was a gleam of the old humour in his eyes, as he replied :

‘Only the most fortunate—in my friends ; they are so clever, they see things so quickly. You make this very easy.’

Oswyn did not shift for a while from his position : he was touched, moved more deeply than he showed ; and there was a trace of emotion in his voice—of something which resembled envy.

‘The happy woman ! . It is she who ought to know, to understand.’

‘It is for that I wished to tell you,’ went on Rainham faintly, ‘that she might know

some day, that there might be just one person who could give her the truth in its season. Yes ! I wanted her to be always in ignorance of what she had made of her life, of the kind of man she had married. She was such a child ; it seemed too pitiful. It was for that I did it—damned myself in her eyes ; to give her a little longer—a sort of respite. Very likely I made a mistake ! Those things can't be concealed for ever, and the longer the illusion lasts, the more bitter the awakening. Only, if it might serve her later, in her darkest hour, as a sort of after-thought, it won't have been quite vain. That is how I see it now : I want her to know immensely—to know that she has always been unspeakably dear to me. Ah, don't mistake me ! It's not for myself, it's not yet ; I shall have done with life, done with love, by that time. When one is as tired

as I am, death seems very good ; only it hasn't those things. Nothing can make any difference to me ; I am thinking of her, that some day or other it will be for her benefit to understand, to remember——'

'To remember ?'

'Yes, to remember,' repeated Rainham quietly, 'that her unhappiness has its compensation ; if she has been bitterly wronged, she has also been fervently loved.'

The other said nothing for a long time—simply considered the situation which Rainham's words, and still more even than anything that he had said, the things that he had not said, had strikingly revealed to him, leaving him, at the last, in a state of mingled emotions over which, perhaps, awe predominated.

At last he remarked abruptly :

'It *is* you who are fortunate ; you are

so nearly done with it all; you've such a long rest before you.' Then he added with a new solemnity: 'You may trust me, Rainham. When it is seasonable, Mrs. Lightmark shall know the truth. Perhaps she will come to me for it—Heaven knows!—stranger things have happened. You have my hand upon it; I think you are right.'

'Right? You mean that it wasn't a mistake, a *bêtise*?'

'*Felix culpa!* If it was a mistake it was a very fine one.'

'Ah! I don't regret it,' said Rainham, 'only——'

'Only it was a mistake to suppose that life was to be arranged. That was all I meant. Yes; I don't believe in much, but I believe in necessity. You can't get over it yourself, and you can't—no, not for all your goodwill, your generosity—

get over it for another. There are simply inevitable results of irrevocable causes, and no place for repentance or restitution. And yet you help her, not as you meant to, and not now ; but ah, you help her !

‘So long as I do that——’ murmured Rainham, with a deep inhalation, closing his eyes wearily, in a manner which revealed how severely the intimate strain of conversation had told upon him.

Oswyn waited a little longer, in half expectation of his further utterance ; but Rainham made no sign, lay quite motionless and hushed, his hands clasped outside the counterpane as if already in the imitation of death ; then the other rose and made a quiet exit, imagining that his friend slept, or would soon sleep.

And yet actually, in spite of the extreme physical weariness which had gradually stolen over him, dulling his senses, so that

he was hardly conscious of Oswyn's departure, or of the subdued entrance of the nurse, who had been discreetly waiting for it, Rainham's mind was still keenly vigilant ; and it was in the relief of a certain new lucidity, an almost hieratic calm, that he reviewed that recent interview, in which he had so deliberately unburdened himself. It seemed as if, in his great weakness, the ache of his old desire, his fever of longing, had suddenly left him, giving place (as though the literal wasting away of his body had really given freer access to that pure spirit, its prisoner) to a love now altogether purged of passion, and become strangely tolerable and sweet.

CHAPTER XXX.

IF Philip Rainham's name, during that long, hard winter and ungracious spring—near the close of which he turned his face, with the least little sigh of regret, to the wall—was not often mentioned in the house in Parton Street, at whose door he had formerly knocked so often, it must not be supposed that by its occupants it had been in any way forgotten. He had not committed the discourtesy of leaving Lady Garnett's note unanswered; on the contrary, he had answered it both promptly and—as it seemed to him—well, in a letter which was certainly diplomatic, suggesting

as it did—at least, to Mary Masters, to whom it had been shown—that he was on the point of an immediate flight South.

Whether the elder lady was equally deceived by his ambiguous phrases, it was not so easy to declare. She had at this time less than ever the mode of persons who wear their hearts upon their sleeves ; her mask of half-cynical good-humour was constantly up ; and she met the girl's hinted interrogations — for directly the nature of their uneasiness, by a sort of tacit agreement, was not alluded to—with the same smiling indifference, the same air of bland reassurance which she brought to the discussion of a sauce or an *entremet* at one of those select little dinner-parties on which she piqued herself, and which latterly had been more incessant and more select than ever.

Only on Mary's sensitive ear something

in the elaborately cheerful tone in which she mentioned their vanished friend would occasionally jar. It was too perfectly well done not to appear a little exaggerated ; and though she could force a smile at Lady Garnett's persistent picture of the recalcitrant godson basking, with his pretext of ill health, on the sunny terraces of Monte Carlo, she none the less cherished a suspicion that the picture was as little convincing to its author as to herself, that her aunt also had silent moments in which she credited the more depressing theory.

And the long silence simply deepened her conviction that, all the time they were imposing upon themselves with such vain conjectures, he was actually within their reach, sick and sorry and alone, in that terrible Blackpool, which she peopled, in her imagination of a young lady whose eastward wanderings had never extended

beyond a flower show in the Temple Gardens, with a host of vague, inconceivable horrors.

From Bordighera, from Monaco, she argued, he would certainly have written, if it were only a line of reassurance, for there his isolation was impregnable. Only the fact that he had stayed on in London could account for the need of this second arm of silence, as well as of solitude, to enforce his complete withdrawal from the torment of tongues.

Certainly, wherever he might actually be, the girl had never realized more fully than just then what an irreparable gap estrangement from him made in her life.

There was, indeed, no pause in the stream of clever, cultivated, charming persons who rang daily at their discriminating door, who drank tea in their drawing-room,

and talked felicitously for their entertainment.

It was a miscellaneous company, although the portal was difficult in a manner, and opened only on conditions of its own—conditions, it may be said, which, to the uninitiated, to the excluded, seemed fantastic enough.

One might be anything, Lady Garnett's constant practice seemed to enunciate, provided one was not a bore; one could represent anything—birth or wealth, or the conspicuous absence of these qualities—so long as one also effectively represented one's self. This was the somewhat democratic form which the old lady's aristocratic tradition assumed.

It was not, then, without a certain pang of self-reproach that Mary wondered one evening—it was at the conclusion of one of their most successful entertainments—

that a company so brilliant, so distinguished, should have left her only with a nervous headache and a distinct sense of satisfaction that the last guest had gone.

Was she, then, after all an unworthy partaker of the feast which her aunt had so long and liberally spread for her delectation?

As she sat in her own room, still in her dress of the evening, before the comfortable fire, which cast vague half-lights into the dark, spacious corners—she had extinguished the illumination of candles which her maid had left her, a sort of unconscious tribute to the economical traditions of her youth—she found herself considering this question and the side issues it involved very carefully.

Was it from some flaw in her nature, some lack of subtilty, or inbred stupidity, that she found the intimates of Parton

Street so uninspiring, had been so little amused?

The dozen who had dined with them to-night—how typical they might be of the rest!—original and unlike each other as they were, each having his special distinction, his particular note, were hardly separable in her mind. They were very cultivated, very subtle, very cynical. Their talk, which flashed quickest around Lady Garnett, who was the readiest of them all, could not possibly have been better; it was like the rapid passes of exquisite fencers with foils. And they all seemed to have been everywhere, to have read everything, and at the last to believe in nothing—in themselves and their own paradoxes least of all. There was nothing in the world which existed except that one might make of it an elegant joke. And yet of old, the girl reflected, she had found

them stimulating enough; their limitations, at least, had not seemed to her to weigh seriously against their qualities, negative though these last might be.

Had it been, then, simply the presence of Mr. Rainham which had leavened the company, and the personal fascination of his friendship—indefinable and unobtrusive as that had been—which had enabled her to adopt for the moment their urbane, impartial point of view?

Perhaps there had been a particle of truth in the charge so solemnly levelled at her by Mr. Sylvester: it was a false position that she maintained.

The attitude of Lady Garnett and her intimates, of persons (the phrase of Steele's recurred to her as meeting it appropriately) 'who had seen the world enough to undervalue it with good breeding,' must seem to her at last a little sterile when she was

conscious—never more than now—of how clearly and swiftly the healthy young blood coursed through her veins, dissipating any morbid imaginations that she might feel inclined to cherish. She looked out at life, in her conviction that so little of it had yet been lived, that for her it might easily be a long affair, with eyes which were still full of interest and, to a certain degree, of hope; and this did not detract from at least one ‘impossible loyalty,’ from which it seemed to her she would never waver. And Charles Sylvester’s infelicitous proposal recurred to her, and she was forced to ask herself whether, after all, it was quite so infelicitous as it seemed. Might not some sort of solution to the difficulties which oppressed her be offered by that alliance? Conscientiously she considered the question, and for a long time; but with the closest consideration the prospect

refused to cheer her, remained singularly uninviting. And yet, arid as the notion appeared of a procession hand-in-hand through life with a husband so soberly precise, to the tune of political music, she was still hardly decided upon her answer when she at length reluctantly left her comfortable fire and composed herself to sleep.

It was not until a day or two later that a prolonged visit from the subject of these hesitations reminded her—perhaps more forcibly than before—that, however in his absence she might oscillate, in his actual presence a firm negative was, after all, the only answer which could ever suffice.

At the close of what seemed a singularly long afternoon, during which her aunt, who was confined to her room with

a bad headache, had left to her the burden of entertaining, Mary came to this conclusion.

Mr. Sylvester had come with the first of her callers, and had made no sign of moving when the last had gone. And in the silence, a little portentous, which had ensued when they were left together, the girl had read easily the reason of his protracted stay. She glanced furtively, with a suggestion of weariness in her eyes, at the little jewelled watch on her wrist, wondering if in the arrival of a belated visitor there might not still be some respite.

‘You are not going out?’ he asked tentatively, detecting her. ‘I expect my sister will be here soon.’

‘No, I am not going out,’ admitted the girl reluctantly. ‘I am on duty, you know. Somebody may arrive at any

minute,' she added, not quite ingenuously.
'Let us hope it will be your sister.'

'I hope not—not just yet,' he protested.
'It is so long, Miss Masters, since I have seen you alone. That is my excuse for having remained such an unconscionable time. I have to seize an opportunity.'

She made no remark, sitting back in the chair, her fine head bent a little, thoughtfully, her hands folded quietly in her lap, in an attitude of resignation to the inevitable.

'You can't mistake me,' he went on at last eagerly. 'I have kept to the stipulation; I have been silent for a long time. I have been to see you, certainly, but not so often as I should have liked, and I have said nothing to you of the only thing that was in my head. Now'—he hesitated for an instant, then completed his phrase with an intonation almost passionate

—‘now I want my reward! Can’t you—
can’t you give it me, Mary?’

The girl said nothing for a moment, looking away from him into the corners of the empty room, her delicate eyebrows knitted a little, as though she sought inspiration from some of Lady Garnett’s choicer *bibelôts*, from the little rose and amber shepherdess of Watteau, who glanced out at her daintily, imperturbably from the midst of her *fête galante*. At last she said quietly :

‘I am sorry, Mr. Sylvester, I can only say, as I said before, it is a great honour you do me, but it’s impossible.’

‘Perhaps I should have waited longer,’ suggested Charles, after a moment’s silence, in which he appeared to be deeply pondering her sentence. ‘I have taken you by surprise ; you have not sufficiently considered——’

‘Oh, I have considered,’ cried the girl quickly, with a sudden flush. ‘I have considered it more seriously than you may believe, more, perhaps, than I ought.’

‘Than you ought?’ he interrupted blankly.

‘Yes,’ she said simply. ‘I mean that if it could ever have been right to answer you as you wished, it would have been right all at once; thinking would not alter it. I am sorry, chiefly, that I allowed this—this procrastination; that I did not make you take my decision that night, at Lady Mallory’s. Yes, for that I was to blame. Only, some day I think you will see that I was right, that it would never have done.’

‘Never have done!’ he repeated, with an accent full of grieved resentment. ‘I think it would have done so admirably. I hardly understand——’

‘I mean,’ said poor Mary helplessly, ‘that you estimated me wrongly. I *am* frivolous—your interests would not have been safe in my hands. You would have married me on a misunderstanding.’

‘No,’ said Charles morosely, ‘I can’t believe that! You are not plain with me, you are not sincere. You don’t really believe that you are frivolous, that we should not suit. In what way am I so impossible? Is it my politics that you object to? I shall be happy to discuss them with you. I am not intolerant; I should not expect you to agree with me in everything. You give me no reasons for this—this absurd prejudice; you are not direct; you indulge in generalizations.’

He spoke in a constrained monotone, which seemed to Mary, in spite of her genuine regret for the pain she gave him, unreasonably full of reproach.

‘Ah!’ she cried sharply, ‘since I don’t love you, is not that a reason? Oh, believe me,’ she went on rather wearily, ‘I have no prejudice, not a grain! I would sooner marry you than not. Only I cannot bring myself to feel towards you as a woman ought to the man she marries. Very likely I shall never marry.’

He considered her, half angrily, in silence, with his unanimated eyes; his dignity suffered in discomposure, and lacking this, pretentious as it was, he seemed to lack everything, becoming unimportant and absurd.

‘Oh, you will marry!’ he said at last sullenly, an assertion which Mary did not trouble to refute.

He returned the next minute, with a persistency which the girl began to find irritating, to his charge.

‘I don’t understand it. They seem to

me wilful, unworthy of you, your reasons ; it's perverse—yes, that is what it is, perverse ! You are not really happy here ; the life doesn't suit you.'

'What a discovery !' cried the girl half mockingly. 'I am not really happy ! Well, if I admit it ?'

'I could make you so by taking you out of it. You are too good for it all, too good to sit and pour out tea for—for the sort of people who come here.'

'Do you mean,' she asked, with a touch of scorn in her voice, 'that we are not respectable ?'

'That is not you who speak,' he persisted ; 'it is your aunt who speaks through you. I know it is the fashion now to cry out against one, even in good society, to call one straitlaced, if one respects certain conventions. There are some I respect profoundly ; and not the least that one

which forbids right-minded gentlewomen to receive men of notoriously disgraceful lives. One should draw the line; one should draw it at that Hungarian pianist who was here this afternoon. Your aunt, of course, is a Frenchwoman; she has different ideas. But you, I can't believe that you care for this society, for people like Kronopolski and—and Rainham. Oh, it hurts me, and I imagine how distasteful it must be to you, that you must suffer these people. I want to take you away from it all.'

The girl had risen, flushing a little. She replied haughtily, with a vibration of passion in her voice :

'You are not generous, Mr. Sylvester. You are not even just. What right have I ever given you to dictate to me whom I shall know or refuse to know? I, too, have my convictions; and I think your

view is narrow, and uncharitable, and false. You see, we don't agree enough. . . . Ah, let it end, Mr. Sylvester!' She went on more gently, but very tiredly, her pale face revealing how the interview had strained her: 'I wish you all the good in the world, but I can't marry you. Let us shake hands on that, and say good-bye.'

Sylvester had also risen to his feet, and he stood facing her for a moment indecisively, as though he hardly credited the finality of his rejection.

They were still in this attitude, and the fact gave a certain tinge of embarrassment to their greetings, when the door opened, and Mrs. Lightmark was announced.

'I was on the point of going,' explained Charles nervously. 'I thought you were not coming, you know.'

Eve made no effort to detain him, half

suspecting that she had appeared at a strenuous moment. When the barrister had departed (Mary had just extended to him the tips of her frigid fingers), and Eve's polite inquiries after Lady Garnett's health had been satisfied, she remarked :

‘ I really only came in for a cup of tea. I walked across from Dorset Square. I have sent the carriage to pick up my husband at his club : it's coming back for me. You look tired, Mary. I think I oughtn't to stay. You look as if you had been having a political afternoon. Poor Charles, since he has been in the House, can think of nothing but blue-books.’

‘ Tired ?’ queried the girl listlessly ; ‘ no, not particularly. Besides, I am always glad to see you, it happens so seldom.’

‘ Yes ; except in a crowd. One has never any time. Have you heard, by the

way, that my husband is one of the new Associates ?'

She went on quickly, preventing Mary's murmured congratulations :

' Yes, they have elected him. I suppose it is a very good thing. He has his hands full of portraits now.'

Then she remarked inconsequently—the rapidity with which she passed from topic to topic half surprised Mary, who did not remember the trait of old :

' We are going to the theatre to-night—that is to say, if my husband has been able to get seats. It's the first night of a new comedy. I meant to ask you to come with us, only it was an uncertainty. If the box is not forthcoming, you must come when we do go. Only, of course, it will not be the *première*.'

' I should like to,' said Mary vaguely.
' I don't care so much about first nights.

I like the theatre ; but I go so seldom. Aunt Marcelle does not care for English plays ; she says they are like stale bread-and-butter. I tell her that is not so bad.'

'The *mot*, you mean ?'

'Partly ; but also the thing. Bread-and-butter is a change after a great many *petits fours*.'

Mrs. Lightmark smiled a little absently as she sat smoothing the creases out of her pretty fawn-coloured gloves.

'Oh, the *petits fours*,' she said, 'for choice. One can take more of them, and amuse one's self longer.'

They heard a carriage draw up suddenly in the street below, and Eve, who had been glancing from time to time expectantly at the window, went over and looked out. She recognised her liveries and the two handsome bays.

‘ Perhaps I had better not let him come up,’ she said ; ‘ it is late already, and. you will be wanting to dress.’

Lightmark had just alighted from the carriage when his wife joined him in the street. He held the door for her silently, and stopped for a moment to give the direction, ‘ Home,’ to the coachman before he took the place at her side.

She turned to him after awhile inquiringly, finding something of unwonted gravity in his manner.

‘ Did you get the box ?’ she asked.

‘ The box ?’ he repeated blankly. Then, pulling himself up, ‘ No,’ he said quickly, ‘ I forgot all about it. The fact is, I heard something this afternoon which put it out of my head. I am afraid,’ he went on, with a growing hesitation, ‘ you will be rather shocked.’

‘ Ah,’ she cried quickly, catching at her

breath, 'something has happened. Tell me. Don't preface it ; I can bear anything if you will only tell me straight out.'

'It's Rainham,' he murmured. 'He died last night at Blackpool. I heard it from McAllister, at the club.'

He looked away from her vaguely out of his window at the pale streets, where a few lamps were beginning to appear, waiting in a fever of apprehension, which he vainly sought to justify, for some word or comment on the part of his wife.

As none came, and the silence grew intolerable, he ventured at last to glance furtively across at her. Her face seemed to him a shade paler than before, but that might be exaggerated by the relief of her rich and sombre furs. Her eyes were quite expressionless and blank, although she had the air of being immensely thoughtful ; her mouth was inscrutable and unmoved. And

he experienced a sudden pang of horror at the anticipation of a dinner alone with her, with the ghostly presence of this news dividing them, before he reminded himself that Colonel Lightmark was to be of the party.

For perhaps the first time in his life the prospect of his uncle's company afforded him a sensation of relief.

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHEN Oswyn emerged from the narrow doorway of the gallery in Bond Street, which on the morrow was to be filled with the heterogeneous presence of those who, for different reasons, are honoured with cards of invitation to private views, it was still daylight, although the lamps had been lighted; and the east wind, which during the earlier hours of the day had made the young summer seem such a mockery of flowery illusions, had taken a more genial air from the south into alliance; and there was something at once caressing and exhilarating in their

united touch as they wandered in gentle eddies up the crooked thoroughfare.

Oswyn paused upon the pavement, outside the showroom which Mosenthal called a gallery, gazing up the road towards Oxford Street, with a momentary appreciation of the subtile early evening charm, which lent so real a beauty even to a vista of commonplace shop-fronts and chimney-pots, straightening his bent figure, and wondering whither to betake himself.

He had not allowed his friend's death to be an excuse for abandoning the projected exhibition; indeed, when this event occurred, he was already too far compromised; and he even found the labour involved in the preparations for the new departure a very welcome distraction—the one thing which made it possible for the desolate man to stay on

in London, which, he assured himself dogmatically, was the only place on earth where he could face life with an indifference which was at least a tolerable imitation of equanimity.

To get together the materials for even a modest exhibition of the kind which he contemplated, it became necessary for him to ransack old portfolios, and to borrow from dealers, and from his few discriminating private patrons, works which had but recently left his studio and could still be traced; to utilize all the hours of daylight accorded to him by a grudging season for finishing, mounting, and retouching.

The man who made frames for Oswyn knew him of old as an exacting customer and hard to please, who insisted on a rigid adherence to his own designs, and was quick to detect inferior workman-

ship or material ; but during the last few days he had been driven almost to rebellion by the painter's exigencies ; never had such calls been made upon him for flawless glass, and delicately varied shades of gold and silver ; never had artist's eye been so ruthless in the condemnation of imperfect mitres and superfluous plaster.

But now the work of preparation was at an end : the catalogues had been printed, and his *impresario* had judiciously circulated invitations to press and public : the work was done, and the workman felt only weary and indifferent. If the public howled, what did it matter ? Their hostility would be for him a corroboration, for his Jew an invaluable advertisement. If they fawned, so much the better : it would not hurt him, and Mosenthal would still have his advertise-

ment. If they were indifferent, well, so was he.

The question of pecuniary profit troubled him not at all (though here his Jew joined issue): what in the world could he do with money, now? He could paint a picture in a month which would keep him for six, and the dealer who bought it probably for a year.

Margot was already provided for, even handsomely: in that respect, at least, her first adopted father had left no void for his successor to fill.

So again he shrugged his shoulders. And upon that evening, for the first time since Rainham's death, he dined, more solitary and more silent than ever, at his familiar table at Brodonowski's. He found that, after all, his nervous anticipation of inconvenient protestations of sympathy was not fulfilled; there were not

many men who knew him more than by sight at Brodonowski's, and the few of his old associates who were there had the good sense to exhibit nothing extraordinary in their demeanour towards him. Only they were a little less wildly humorous than of old, and more forbearing in their sallies; the conversation died out for an instant as he made his way quickly, with the faintest sign of recognition, through their midst—and that was all.

Rainham's death had affected some of them for a few days perhaps, but it had not the shock of the unexpected; they chiefly wondered that he had dragged his life through so cruel a winter. And his close alliance with Oswyn had, as a natural consequence, debarred him from a real intimacy with any of the other men, who, for the most part younger,

cultivated different friendships and different pursuits.

They had missed Oswyn during his seclusion of the last few weeks; he was so essentially the presiding silent genius of the place—a man to be pointed out to new-comers, half-ironically, as the greatest, most deeply injured, of them all; the possessor of a talent unapproached and unappreciated. They felt that his presence lent a distinction to the dingy resort which it otherwise frequently lacked: and he had come to be so far regarded as a permanent institution, of an almost official nature, that even on the coldest nights his chair by the fireside had remained untenanted.

When the next morning came, Oswyn felt desperately inclined to break the promise which Mosenthal had, with some difficulty, exacted from him, and to keep

far from Bond Street and the crowd who even then were assembling to cast their careless glances and light words at the work of his life ; it was only the fear of the taint of cowardice, and a certain perversity, which induced him eventually to present himself within the gallery rather late in the afternoon.

As he entered the room, looking about him with a kind of challenge, many eyes were turned upon him (for people go to private views not to see pictures—that is generally impossible, but to see and be seen of men), but few had any suspicion that this strange man, with the shabby, old - fashioned apparel, and expression half-nervous, half-defiant, was the painter whose pictures they were pretending to criticise.

Very few of those present — hardly half a dozen perhaps—knew him even

by sight ; and while his evident disregard for social convention marked him, for the discerning observer, as a person of probably artistic distinction, the general conjecture set him down, not as a painter—he did not seem to be of that type—but as a man of letters—probably a maker of obscure verse.

When he had mastered the first wild impulse which prompted him to tear his pictures down, to turn their faces to the wall—anything to hide them from this smiling, languid, well-dressed crowd—and resigned himself to observation, he saw that Mosenthal was beaming at him complacently, through the massive gold spectacles which adorned and modified the bridge of his compromising nose, from his seat behind the table where information as to the prices of the exhibits could be obtained.

There were exactly forty drawings and paintings to be seen upon the sparsely-covered walls, which had been draped for the occasion with coarsely-woven linen of a dull olive-green, and about half of these were drawings and studies, small in point of size, executed in chalk and pastels.

The greater part of these represented ordinary scenes of London outdoor life—a deserted corner of Kensington Gardens, with tall soot-blackened trees lifting their stately tracery of dark branches into the sky; a reach of the wide, muddy river, with a gaunt bridge looming through the fog; a gin-palace at night-time, with garish lamps shining out upon the wet streets and crouching beggars.

Of the remainder, which included a few portraits and some imaginative subjects, the greater number were painted in oils,

and the largest canvas would not have seemed out of place on the walls of an ordinary room.

Oswyn smiled grimly as he noticed that the portrait of Margot, which he had begun for Rainham and finished for himself, was a considerable centre of attraction; there was quite a dense crowd in the vicinity of this canvas (it is true, it was near the tea-table), and it included two bishops, a duke, and an actress, of whom the last-named was certainly more stared at than the picture.

It irritated him, in spite of his contempt for the throng, to see people standing, chatting, with their backs turned towards his creations; and when Mosenthal informed him in a triumphant stage-whisper, leaning across the table littered with catalogues, that nine of the pictures had already found purchasers, he was

almost inclined to rebel, to refuse to ratify the sales.

The only friendly face which he encountered during the afternoon was that of McAllister, who presently brought his congratulations and conspicuous presence to the corner to which Oswyn had betaken himself; and for a time he found himself listening, while the Scotchman enlightened him, somewhat against his will, as to the names and celebrity of the distinguished visitors whom he was supposed to be receiving.

He was assured that the press notices could not fail to be favourable (he mentally promised himself that nothing should induce him to read a newspaper for at least a fortnight), and the flattering comments of Mr. This and Lady That were half apologetically retailed for his presumed delectation.

As his eyes wandered, with his attention, furtively round the room, they presently encountered, in their passage from group to group, a face which seemed vaguely familiar—the face of a woman, whom he certainly had never known, but whose beauty, he thought, was not appealing to his admiration for the first time.

She was standing with her profile turned towards him, gazing gravely at his study of a pale figure, with beautiful eyes and an armful of wonderfully coloured poppies, which he called ‘Thanatos, the Peacebearer.’

When she moved, presently, her gaze rested on him for a moment, with the faintest note of inquiry interrupting the smile with which she was listening to the sallies of her escort for the time being; the smile and glance revealed her

more perfectly to Oswyn, and he was prepared to hear McAllister greet her as Mrs. Lightmark when, a few minutes later, she passed them on her way round the room.

Eve had spent the week which followed the afternoon upon which her husband had stunned her with the news of Philip Rainham's death almost in solitude.

Lightmark had been obliged to pay a hasty visit to Berlin, on business connected with an International Art Congress, and his wife at the last moment decided, somewhat to his relief, that she would not accompany him. A man of naturally quick perception, and with a certain vein of nervous alertness underlying his outer clothing of careless candour, he could not help feeling that when he was alone with his wife he was being watched, that traps were set for him—in short, that he was

suspected. And not only when they were alone had he cause for alarm : in crowded rooms, at mammoth dinner-parties and colossal assemblies he frequently became aware, by a sense even quicker than vision, that his wife's eyes were directed upon him from the farther side of the room, the opposite end of the dinner-table, with that wistful, childish expression in their depths, which, growing sterner and more critical of late, had ended by boring him.

Before Rainham's death, Eve, in her private discussions of the situation, had generally concluded by dismissing the subject petulantly, with a summing-up, only partially convincing, that everything would come right in the end ; that in time that miserable scene would be forgotten or explained away ; and that the old intimacy, of which it was at once so bitter and so pleasant to dream, would be restored.

Her training—of which her mother was justly proud—had endowed her with a respect for social convention too great to allow her to think of rebelling against the existing order of things. She consoled herself by the reflection that at least she had committed no fault, and that no active discipline of penitence could justly be expected of her.

Concerning the truth of Rainham's story she could not fail to harbour doubts ; that her husband was concealing something was daily more plainly revealed to her.

It was hard that she should suffer, but what could she do ? At the bottom of her heart, in spite of the feeling of resentment which assailed her when—as it often did—the idea occurred to her that he had not exhibited towards her the perfect frankness which their old friendship demanded, she pitied Rainham. There were even

times—such was her state of doubt—when she pitied her husband, and blamed herself for suspecting him of—she hardly owned what.

But, most of all, she pitied herself. She felt that in any case she had been wronged, whether Philip's ill-told tale was true or false.

But her pride enabled her to keep her doubts locked within her own heart, to present a smiling, if occasionally pale, face to the world, in whose doings she took so large a part, and even to deceive Mrs. Sylvester.

And now Philip was dead ! The severance, which she had persuaded herself was only temporary, was on a sudden rendered inexorably complete and eternal.

The blow was a cruel one, and for a time it seemed to be succeeded by a kind of rebellious insensibility. Eve felt de-

moralized and careless of the future ; her frame of mind was precisely that of the man who is making his first hasty steps along the headlong road which is popularly spoken of as leading to the devil.

Later she began to reproach herself. She reflected, with a kind of scornful wonder at her weakness, that she had allowed all chance of explanation to escape ; the one man whom she could trust, who would surely give her a straightforward answer if she appealed to him by the memory of the old days, was beyond the reach of her questions, silent to eternity. Her former sorrow seemed trivial by comparison with this.

On his return, Lightmark found his wife looking so pale and tired that he broke off in the middle of the story of his flattering reception at the German Court to express a suggestion for her benefit, that she had

better go to Brighton or somewhere to recruit. She would never get through the season at this rate. Yes, she must certainly take a holiday, directly after the Academy Private View.

Eve caught at the idea, only she did not wait for the Academy to open. She went for a fortnight, accompanied by an old servant of the family, who regarded her mistress's birth as quite a recent event, to Mrs. Sylvester's cottage in Norfolk.

When Mrs. Lightmark came back to town her face was still pale, but her brow wore a serener air, and her eyes had lost their look of apprehension. The woman had arisen triumphant out of the ashes of her childhood, with a heart determined to know the truth, and to face it, however bitter it might prove to be. Meanwhile, she would not judge hastily.

As she drove up Bond Street one day

soon after her return to town, the advertisement of Oswyn's exhibition caught her eye. She would probably have remembered a name so uncommon if she had only heard it once, and, as it was, she had heard it several times, and associated with it, moreover, a certain reticence which could not fail to arouse a woman's curiosity.

Later, when Mosenthal's card of invitation for the Private View arrived, she noted the day upon her list of engagements.

On the morning of Oswyn's ordeal, Eve sent a message to her husband, who was engaged with a model in the studio, to notify to him her intention of taking the carriage into town later in the afternoon ; to which he had returned a gallant reply, expressing a hope that, if it would not bore her too much, she would pick him up somewhere and drive him home. Where

and when could he meet her? The reply, 'At Mosenthal's at five o'clock,' did not surprise him. He did not happen to have the vaguest idea as to what was the attraction of the day at that particular gallery. It might be Burmese landscapes or portraits of parrots; it was all one to him. It was extremely decorous in his wife to affect picture-galleries, and Mosenthal's place was conveniently near to his favourite club.

A few minutes before the appointed hour he made his way from the new and alarmingly revolutionary club-house, where he had been indulging in afternoon tea in company with Felicia Dollond, to the gallery, outside which his horses were already waiting, and, perceiving Oswyn's name on the placards disposed on either side of the entrance, he felt only a momentary hesitation.

Oswyn would probably not be there ; and, after all, why should he not inspect the man's pictures ?

Before reasons had time to present themselves he had passed into the room, and had been deferentially welcomed and presented with a catalogue by the proprietor in person.

The room was still crowded, and it was oppressively warm, with an atmosphere redolent of woollen and silken fabrics, like a milliner's shop on the day of a sale.

At first he made no effort to join his wife, whom he discerned from afar talking to a pillar of the Church in gaiters and a broad-brimmed hat.

He looked at the pictures whenever there was a break in the sequence of bows and greetings which had to be exchanged with two-thirds of the people in the room ; and as he looked he was smitten with a

quick thrill of admiration: he was still young enough to recognise the hand of the master. And in his admiration there was a trace of a frank envy, a certain unresentful humiliation—the feeling which he could remember to have experienced many times in the old days, when he put aside the sonnet he had just finished for some fashionable magazine, and took down from his limited bookshelf the little time-worn volume which contained the almost forgotten work of a poet whose name would have fallen strangely on the editorial ear.

Before long there was a general departure, and Lightmark, flushed with the triumphs of a conversation in which, in the very centre of an admiring group of his antagonist's worshippers, he had successfully measured swords with a notorious wit, turned to look for his wife; and, for

the first time, meeting Oswyn's eye, half involuntarily advanced to greet him.

'This is an unexpected honour,' said Oswyn coldly, disregarding the proffered hand ; 'unexpected—and unwelcome !'

Then he would have turned away, leaving his contempt and hatred unspoken, but his passion was too strong.

'Have you come to seek ideas for your next Academy picture,' he continued quickly, with a sneer trembling on his lips, 'or for the *Outcry* ?'

Lightmark grew a little pale, biting his lip, and frowning for a moment, before he assumed a desperate mask of good-humour.

'Hang it, man !' he answered quickly, 'be reasonable ! Haven't you forgiven me yet ? Though what you have to forgive—— I only want to congratulate you, to tell you that I admire your work—— immensely.'

‘I don’t want your congratulations,’ interrupted the other hoarsely. ‘I might forget the wrong which, as you well know, you have done me; that is nothing! But have you forgotten your—your friend, Rainham? You had better go,’ he added, with a savage gesture. ‘Go! before I denounce you, proclaim you, you pitiful scoundrel!’

The man’s forced calm had given way to a quivering passion; his lips trembled under the stress of the words which thronged to them; and as he turned on his heel, with a glance eloquent of loathing, he did not notice that Eve was standing close behind her husband, with parted lips, and intent eyes gleaming out of a face as pale as his own.

Lightmark recovered himself quickly, shrugging his shoulders, as soon as the other was out of earshot. He glanced at

his wife, who was following Oswyn with her eyes ; he did not dare to ask, or even to think, what she might have heard.

‘ The man’s mad,’ he said lightly,
‘ madder than ever !’

CHAPTER XXXII.

IT was Margot who gave him the letter : Oswyn remembered that afterwards with a kind of superstition. She came to meet him, wearing an air of immense importance, when his quick step fell upon the bare wooden stairway which led to his rooms.

‘There’s a letter for you,’ she said, nodding impressively, ‘a big letter, with a seal on it ; and Mrs. Thomas had to write something on a piece of green paper before the postman would give it to her.’

Then she followed him into the twilight of the attic which was his studio, and watched him gravely while he lighted the

gas and, in déference to her curiosity, broke the seal.

The envelope contained a letter and a considerable bundle of papers, folded small, and neatly tied together with red tape.

When he had read the letter, he turned the package over with a sigh, reflectively eyeing it for some minutes, and then put it aside.

Later, when Mrs. Thomas, his landlady, had carried the child away to bed, he took the papers up again, and, after some hesitation, slowly untied the tape which encircled them.

The letter was from Messrs. Furnival and Co., the firm of solicitors who had acted for Rainham, and who were now representing Oswyn as his friend's sole executor.

It contained a brief intimation that the

grant of probate of the late Mr. Rainham's will had been duly extracted, and ended with a request that the executor would consider the enclosed bundle of documents, which appeared to be of a private nature, and decide whether they should be preserved or destroyed.

When he had removed the tape, Oswyn noticed that a great many of the letters had the appearance of being in the same handwriting; these were tied up separately with a piece of narrow faded silk riband, and it was evident that they were arranged more or less in order of date; the writing in the case of the earliest letter being that of a child, while the most recent, dated less than a year ago, was a short note, an invitation, with the signature 'Eve Lightmark.'

Oswyn contemplated the little bundle with an air of indecision, falling at last

into a long reverie, his thoughts wandering from the letters to the child, the woman who had written them, the woman whose name his friend so rarely breathed, whose face he had seen for the first time, proud and cold and beautiful, that very afternoon. Did she, too, care? Would she guard her secret as jealously?

Suddenly he frowned; the thought of Lightmark's effrontery recurred, breaking his contemplative calm and disturbing his speculations. He laid the papers aside without further investigation, and, after gazing for a few minutes vacantly out of the uncurtained window, rolled a fresh cigarette and went out into the night.

Next morning he made an expedition to Lincoln's Inn Fields to see Messrs. Furnival and Co., taking the packet with him. The partner who had the matter in hand was engaged, and he was kept

waiting for nearly half an hour, in a dusty room with an elaborately moulded ceiling, and a carved wooden chimney-piece and scrolled panelling of some beauty, both disfigured with thick layers of dingy brown paint. A fire had just been lighted, in deference to the unseasonable coldness of the June day, and the room was full of pungent smoke.

As he waited his irritation increased. Lightmark's impertinent intrusion (such it appeared to him) and the scene which had ensued, had entirely aroused him from the state of indifference into which, when the incident occurred, he was beginning to relapse. The man was dangerous; a malign passion, a craving for vengeance, slept in him, born of his southern blood, and glancing out now and again at his eyes, like the fire which darts from the windows of a burning building.

He wondered now, as he thought of the wrongs he had borne, as it seemed to him, so patiently ; in Rainham's lifetime there had doubtless been reasons, but was he never to retaliate ? Had not he considered other people enough ? His forbearance struck him now as a kind of weakness, as something almost contemptible, to be thought of with a feeling akin to shame.

Finally he was ushered up into Mr. Furnival's room, a pleasant apartment on the first-floor, with windows looking out upon a charming oasis of grass and trees. The lawyer apologized for keeping him waiting, intimated delicately that he had a pressing appointment in five minutes' time, and expressed his sympathy with Oswyn's difficulty as to the letters.

‘It's quite a matter for you to decide,’ he said. ‘If you like to take the respon-

sibility you may burn them forthwith, unread; or you may give them to me, to file with the other papers. But I should advise you to glance through the later letters, at all events. May I look at them? Thanks.'

Oswyn had given him the packet of letters, and he spread them out on the table at which he was sitting, methodically, in little heaps, clearing a space among the piles of drafts and abstracts which lay before him.

'I think we may destroy these,' said Oswyn, pointing to the little bundle tied up with riband. 'I think I know what they are.'

'As you like,' said Mr. Furnival; 'they appear to be from a lady. Yes, I don't think you need read them.'

'And these,' continued Oswyn. 'They are all from Lady Garnett, and it is

extremely unlikely that they can have any business reference.'

'That disposes of nearly all,' said the lawyer cheerfully. 'I may put them on the fire, then?'

Oswyn bowed a grave assent, and Mr. Furnival dropped the little packets quickly into the hottest part of the fire.

'Now, here is a letter with a very recent postmark,' he continued. 'A man's writing, too, I should say. Will you read this, while I go through the others? It looks like rather a long epistle.'

The handwriting seemed familiar to Oswyn, and his hand trembled slightly as he turned to the signature for corroboration. As he guessed, it was from Lightmark.

'I think I had better read this,' he said grimly, half to himself.

He glanced quickly through the letter,

and then read it a second time slowly, and while he was reading it his expression was such as to confirm the solicitor's previous opinion, that the man was a little bit mad.

When he had finished his perusal (he thought at the time that he should never forget a single word of that disgraceful letter), Oswyn sat in silence for some minutes, intently watching Mr. Furnival's struggles with a large bundle of papers and a small black bag.

The letter had, if such a thing were possible, increased his contempt for the writer ; that the man was insincere (Oswyn would have used a far stronger term) he had been aware from the beginning ; now he knew that he was a coward, a creature almost unworthy of his hatred.

A quick thought struck him, and he smiled.

‘We won’t burn this—at present, at any rate,’ he said quietly. ‘Is there anything else for me to read?’

The lawyer shuffled the remaining papers together quickly.

‘I think not: these are chiefly bills which have since been paid. Will you keep that letter, or do you wish us to do anything about it?’

Oswyn deliberated for a moment, with a curious expression flitting over his face, biting his lip and frowning slightly, as he gazed at the fireplace, where Rainham’s long-cherished letters from Eve and Lady Garnett’s delicate, witty compositions were represented by a little heap of wavering black ashes.

The lawyer looked at his watch uneasily.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Oswyn quickly; ‘I needn’t keep you any longer.’

Will you let me have an envelope? I dare say they can give me Mr. Sylvester's address downstairs — Mr. Charles Sylvester, the barrister?’

‘The new member, you mean, of course?’ said the lawyer. ‘He has chambers in Paper Buildings, No. 11. Do you know him?’

‘I am going to send him this letter,’ said Oswyn briefly, folding it up and bestowing it in the envelope which Mr. Furnival had given him. ‘Thanks, no, I needn't trouble you to have it posted: I prefer to leave it at Mr. Sylvester's chambers myself.’

‘He was a great friend of the late Mr. Rainham, as, of course, you know,’ said the lawyer, as they parted at the door. ‘Mr. Rainham introduced him to us when he was quite a young man—soon after he was called, in fact, and we gave him his

first brief—the first of a good many! He's been one of our standing counsel for years. Good-day!

As he made his way towards the Temple, Oswyn smiled to himself rather savagely, tasting in anticipation the sweets of long-deferred revenge. The flame of his ancient discontent with the academical art of the day, which had been fed by his personal hatred of one particularly successful exponent of it, was fanned into fury. And, at the same time, as he proceeded, with short hasty steps, amply armed for the vindication of his friend, in his grim fatalism he seemed to himself immensely the instrument of destiny, which had so given his enemy into his hands.

He paused when he reached Fleet Street; entering the first public-house, at haphazard, to order six pennyworth of brandy, which he drank neat across the

counter, with slow, appreciative sips, as he reminded himself that, the excellence of his ammunition notwithstanding, he was still without any definite plan of campaign.

Would his luck desert him again? Would Sylvester be away, or refuse to see him? or while receiving him, contrive by some sinuous legal device adroitly to divert his attack? The mere contemplation of any such frustration dulled him strangely.

He called for his glass to be replenished, and emptied it sharply: and immediately the generous spirit moved his pulse, rebuked him for his depression, sent him briskly on his way.

As he lifted the ponderous knocker upon Sylvester's door, he remembered vividly the only other occasion upon which he had visited those chambers. With the

member for Mallow, too, indiscreet busy-body that he was, had he not a reckoning to settle? The choice of him as an instrument of his punishment, which, if it was primarily directed against another, should not leave him wholly unscathed, gave a zest to his malice and increased firmness to his manner, as he curtly ordered the clerk to take in his card.

‘Is it an appointment?’ this youth had asked dubiously, ‘because if it isn’t——’

‘Mr. Sylvester will see me,’ said Oswyn with irritation, ‘if you will have the goodness to do as you are told, and give him my name.’

At which the youth had smiled loftily and retired, only to return five minutes later with an air of greater humility and information that the legislator was disengaged.

Charles looked up at him from the table

at which he was sitting, with an open volume of Hansard before him, coldly waving him to a chair—an offer which Oswyn, mentally damning his superciliousness, ignored.

‘My business is very brief,’ he said quickly ; ‘I can explain it standing.’

‘I understand that it is urgent, Mr.—Mr. Oswyn. Otherwise, you know, I am a busy man.’

‘You mean that my call is inconvenient ? I can quite imagine it. I should hardly have troubled you if you had not once taken the trouble to send for me—you, perhaps, have forgotten the occurrence ; that seemed to give me a sort of right, a claim on your attention.’

‘I recognised it,’ said Charles gravely, in a tone which implied that, had he not given this nicety the benefit of his liberal consideration, the intruder would never

have penetrated so far. 'Since that is agreed, may I ask you to explain your business as expeditiously as possible?'

Oswyn smiled with some irony; and Sylvester suppressed a little shudder, reflecting that the man's uncouthness almost transgressed the bounds of decency.

'I can quote your own words on a previous occasion: it concerns the honour of a friend—the honour of your family, if you like it better.'

Sylvester shut his volume sharply, and glanced up at the other with suppressed irritation.

'That is not a matter I can discuss with you,' he said at last.

'I simply intend you to read,' went on Oswyn calmly, 'a letter which your brother-in-law wrote to my friend Philip Rainham a few weeks before his death.'

Charles rose from his chair quickly, avoiding the other's face.

‘I regret that I can't assist you,’ he said haughtily; ‘I have no interest whatever in the affairs of the late Mr. Rainham, and I must decline to read your letter.’

He glanced significantly at the door, not suppressing a slight yawn; it was incredible how this repulsive little artist, with his indelicate propositions, bored him.

But Oswyn ignored his gesture; simply laying the missive in question on the table, he glanced casually at his watch.

‘I can't compel you to read this letter,’ he said in the same studiously calm voice. ‘I warn you that your honour is gravely interested in its contents, and I will give you five minutes in which to decide. If you still persist in your determination, I

have no course left but to send copies of it to some of Rainham's most intimate friends, and to your sister, Mrs. Lightmark.'

He had his watch in one hand, but his gaze, curiously ironical, followed the direction of Charles's irresolute eyes, and the five minutes had not elapsed before he realized—and a touch of triumph mingled with his immense contempt of the man and his pompous unreality—that Charles's resolution had succumbed.

He stretched out his hand for the letter, unfolded it deliberately, and read it once, twice, three times, with a judicial slowness, which the other, who was now curiously moved, found exasperating.

When at last he looked up at Oswyn he shaded his eyes with one hand, but his face remained for the rest imperturbable and expressionless. The painter saw that

his discretion was larger than he had imagined.

If the reading had been disagreeably illuminative—and Oswyn believed that under his surface composure he concealed, at least, a terrible wound to his pride—he was not going to allow this impression to appear.

‘I might suggest that this document is a forgery,’ he said after a moment.

Oswyn indulged in a harsh little laugh, shrugging his shoulders.

‘That would be too fatuous, Mr. Sylvester.’

‘I might suggest it,’ went on Charles slowly. ‘Perhaps, then, you will be surprised when I tell you that I believe it to be genuine. May I ask, Mr. Oswyn, why you move in this matter?’

‘As Rainham’s friend,’ said Oswyn quickly, ‘I intend to expose the miser-

able calumny which clouded his last days.'

'A public scandal would be greatly to be deplored,' Charles hazarded inconsequently, in the tone of a man who argued with himself.

Oswyn made as if he would have taken up the letter with a gesture of sudden impatience ; but Charles intercepted him quickly, and his voice had a grave simplicity in it which arrested the other's attention.

'Don't mistake me, Mr. Oswyn ; I have not the least desire or intention to suppress this document. I must expect you to judge me harshly ; but you will surely see that my honour is as deeply concerned in the redressing of Mr. Rainham's reputation as anyone's can be, only I am naturally desirous of sparing my—of sparing the innocent persons who are unfortunately

mixed up in the affair unnecessary pain, the scandal of publicity.'

'There are certain persons who must absolutely know the truth,' said Oswyn bluntly.

'If I pledge you my word that the persons whom you mean shall be immediately enlightened, will you leave me to act alone?'

The other was silent for a moment, revolving the proposition, half surprised at the unwonted humility of the barrister's eagerness. At last he said, with a short, ambiguous laugh :

'I will leave it in your hands, Mr. Sylvester.'

He underwent a momentary repentance of his own readiness when he was in the street, and had turned his face to Soho again ; it seemed almost childishly trusting. But presently, remembering he knew not

what shade of curious sternness in Sylvester's manner, he decided that he had done wisely—it was on some such result as this that he had counted in his coming—and that the score, stupendous as it was, would be accurately settled.

For a long while, after his unwelcome visitor had departed, Charles sat silent and buried in deep thought.

From time to time he glanced vaguely at the letter which Oswyn had abandoned, and he wondered—but quite inconsequently, and with no heart to make the experiment—whether any further perusal of those disgraceful lines could explain or palliate the blunt obloquy of the writer's conduct. His concise, legal habit of mind forbade him to cherish any false illusions.

Lightmark, writing in an hour of intimate excitement, when the burden of his friend's sacrifice seemed for a fleeting

moment more intolerable than the wrench of explanation with his wife, had too effectually compromised himself. He had cringed, procrastinated, promised ; had been abject, hypocritical, explicit.

It seemed to Sylvester, in the first flush of his honourable disgust, that there was no generous restitution which the man had not promised, no craven meanness to which he had not amply confessed.

He dropped his correct head upon his hands with something like a moan, as he contrasted the ironical silence which had been Rainham's only answer to this effusion—a silence which had since been irrevocably sealed. He had never before been so disheartened, had never seemed so intimately associated with disgrace.

Even the abortive ending of his passion—he knew that this was deep-seated and genuine, although its outward expression

had been formal and cold—seemed a tolerable experience in comparison.

But this was dishonour absolute, and dishonour which could never be perfectly atoned.

Had not he in his personal antipathy to Philip Rainham—the tide of that ancient hostility surged over him again even while he vowed sternly to make the fullest amends—had he not seized with indecent eagerness upon any pretext or occasion to justify his dislike?

He had, at least, assisted unjustly to destroy Rainham's reputation, giving his adherence to the vainest of vain lies; and however zealous he might be in destroying this elaborate structure which he had helped to build, however successful the disagreeable task of enlightening his sister and the maligned man's most interested friends might prove, the

reproach upon his own foresight would remain.

It was notable that, in the somewhat hard integrity of his character, he did not for a moment seek to persuade himself, as a man of greater sympathy might have done, that Eve was a person to whom the truth could legitimately be spared.

How she would suffer it, and whither her indignation might lead her, he did not care to inquire; these were matters with which henceforth he should decline to meddle. His part would be done when he had given her the simple information that was her due—that they had made a great mistake; that her husband was not to be trusted.

He tried to prepare the few set phrases in which the intelligence would be couched, but found none that were satisfactory. The effort appeared more and more stu-

pendous as the afternoon advanced, until at last, with astonishment at his weakness which refused to be analyzed, he recognised that, after all, it was not possible. It was news which he could not give to his sister with his own lips.

Mary Masters as a possible mediator suddenly occurred to him. He recognised by some occult instinct that she was one of the persons for whom Oswyn had stipulated, to whom restitution was due, and at once he resolved to appeal to her.

He reminded himself that the Lightmarks were entertaining that evening on a scale of quite exceptional grandeur, that he had a card for their fancy-dress ball, from which Lady Garnett and her niece would hardly be absentees. If he could see the girl beforehand, she would doubtless find the time and occasion to say what was necessary.

He had recovered his composure when, at no considerable interval after the formation of this resolve, he was ushered into Lady Garnett's drawing-room. It was his first appearance there since the rejection of his suit (he had not had the courage to renew it, although he was by no means prepared to admit that it was hopeless), and in the slight embarrassment which this recollection caused him he hardly regretted the presence of a second visitor, although his identification as a certain Lord Overstock, whom he believed to be opposed to him in more ways than in his political views (he was a notorious Tory), was not made without a jealous pang. He greeted Mary, however, without undue formality, and went over to Lady Garnett.

The old lady glanced up at him rather listlessly. She was growing deaf, or feigned deafness. He said to himself that

perhaps she was much older than they knew—was growing tired. Her *persiflage*, which Charles had never much appreciated, was less frequent than of old, and she no longer poured out her witticisms with the placid sweetness of a person offering you *bonbons*. There were sentences in her talk—it was when she spoke of the couple opposite them, who were conveniently out of ear-shot—which the barrister found deliberately malignant.

‘You mean that it is settled?’ she asked, affecting to misunderstand some trivial remark. ‘Ah, no, but it will arrange itself—it is coming. You think she will make an admirable duchess? She has sometimes quite the grand air. Have you not found that out? You know his father is very old; he cannot in reason live much longer. And such estates! Personally, too, the nicest of boys, and as proper as if

he had something to gain by it. And yet, in England, a Duke can do almost anything and be respected. Ah, Mr. Sylvester, you did not use your opportunity !

‘I want one now,’ he said rather coldly, ‘of saying two words to Miss Masters.’

She just raised her delicate eyebrows.

‘Will it be very useful ?’

Charles flushed slightly, then he frowned.

‘It has nothing to do with myself. I have some news she should hear. Perhaps you yourself——’

She interrupted him with a little mirthless laugh.

‘I will not hear anything serious, and you look to me very serious. I am old enough to have promised never again to be serious in my life.’

She submitted, however, to listen to him, seeing that his weighty confidences

would not be brooked ; and when he had finished—he said what he had to say in very few words—she glanced up at him with the same air of impenetrable indifference.

‘Come!’ she said, ‘what does it matter to me that you acted in exceedingly bad taste, and repent it? It made no difference to me—I am not the *police des mœurs*. If I were you, I would hold my tongue.’

Then she added, as he glanced at her with evident mystification, shrugging her shoulders :

‘When one is dead, Mr. Sylvester, what does it matter?’

He turned away rather impatiently, his eyes following the fine lines of Mary’s face, which he saw in profile.

He noticed that she talked with animation, and that Lord Overstock’s expression

was frankly admiring. At last the old lady said :

‘ But, yes ; you must tell Mary—by all means. To her it will mean much. See, the Marquis is going ; if you wish I will leave you alone together.’

CHAPTER XXXIII.

‘Now, isn’t it a pretty dance?’ murmured Mrs. Dollond rapturously, as she sank into a low chair in a corner secure from the traffic of the kaleidoscopic crowd which had invaded Mrs. Lightmark’s drawing-room, and opened her painted fan with a little sigh intended to express her beatitude.

Colonel Lightmark, to whom Mrs. Dollond addressed this complimentary query (which, after all, was more of an assertion or challenge, in that it took its answer for granted), was arrayed in the brilliant scarlet and silver of the regiment

which had once the honour of calling him Colonel ; his tunic was so tight that sitting down was almost an impossibility for him, and Mrs. Dollond, who looked charming in her powder and brocade, could not help wondering whether any mortal buttons could stand the strain ; and, on the other hand, the dimensions of his patent leather boots were such that standing, for a man of his weight, involved a torture which it was hard to conceal. And yet the veteran was happy—he was positively radiant. He felt that his nephew's success in the world of Art and of Society considerably enhanced his own importance ; he was not ashamed to owe a portion of his brilliance to borrowed light—and to-night one could not count the celebrities on the fingers of both hands.

The old hero-worshipper gazed com-

placently at the little ever-shifting crowd which surrounded his nephew and his niece (so he called her) at their post near the doorway, and he listened to Mrs. Dollond's sparkling sallies with a blissful ignorance of her secret ambition in the direction of a partner who would make her dance, and for whose edification she would be able to liken the Colonel's warlike figure to a newly-boiled lobster or a ripe tomato.

'Regular flower-show, isn't it?' he suggested, naïvely reinforcing her simile. 'I don't know what the dickens they're all meant for, but a good many of them seem to have escaped from the Lyceum—Juliets, and Portias, and Shylocks, and so forth.'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Dollond. 'I think the Shylocks must be picture-dealers, you know. But their conversation isn't very Shakespearian, is it? I heard Hamlet

say, just now, that the floor was too perfect for anything, and Ophelia—she was dancing with a Pierrot *incroyable*—told her partner that she adored waltzing to a string band !’

They both laughed, the Colonel shortly and boisterously, Mrs. Dollond in a manner which suggested careful study before a looking-glass, with an effect of dimples and of flashing teeth.

‘What wicked things you say, Colonel Lightmark,’ she added demurely. ‘Who is that stately person in the dark figured silk, with a cinque-cento ruff? Isn’t it Lady Garnett’s niece?’

‘Yes, that’s Miss Masters,’ said the Colonel, ‘and I suppose that’s Lady Garnett with her. I don’t think I’ve ever met Lady Garnett, though I’ve often heard of her. What is her dress—whom is she intended to represent? I don’t see how

the dickens one's expected to know, but you're so clever.'

'Oh, she's dressed as—as Lady Garnett! What a lot of people—*real* people, you know—there are here to-night! Dear me, there's the music again already. I believe I've got to dance this time. I do hope my partner's dress won't clash with mine too awfully. That's the worst of fancy dress balls; they really ought to be stage-managed by a painter, and the period ought to be limited. One's never safe. Our dance, Mr. Copal? Number six? Yes, I think it must be! A polka? Then we'll waltz!'

And the Colonel, who was not a dancing man, was left in not unwelcome solitude to reflect somewhat ponderously on the advantages of possessing a nephew and niece young enough, brilliant enough, and rich enough—though that was partly *his* affair

—to cultivate the very pink and perfection of smart society. He regarded Dick in the light of a profitable investment.

When the young people, so to speak, came to the rescue of the avuncular hulk, it was already beginning to drift into the corner of the harbour devoted to derelicts.

The friends who had developed about his path in such flattering numbers when he came home from India, and retired, with a newly-acquired fortune and a vague halo of military distinction about his person, into the ranks of the half-paid, were beginning to find him rather old and, frankly, a considerable bore ; but the timely benevolence which he had extended to his nephew was, it appeared, to have its reward in this world in the shape of a kind of reflected rejuvenescence, a temporary respite from the limbo of (how he hated the word !) fogeydom.

When Dick married, his uncle was already settling down in a narrow groove among the people of yesterday; now he felt that he had once more established his foothold among the people of to-day.

Presently he noticed that Lady Dulinster had arrived, and he made his way across the room to meet her with a quite youthful bashfulness, cannoning apologetically against Romeos and Marguerites, hoping that she would like his uniform.

There was one person, at least, in the room who made no attempt to assure herself that she was enjoying the vivid gaiety of these parti-coloured revels.

Mary Masters, when she had time for solitary thought, found that the atmosphere of the charming room was full of mockery. For her, the passionate vibrations of the strained, incessant strings seemed to breathe the wild complaint of

lost souls ; the multitudinous tread of gliding feet, the lingering sweep of silken skirts, the faint, sweet perfume of exotic flowers, all had a new and strange significance ; the effect of an orchestral fugue wearily repeating the expression of a frenzied heartlessness, a great unrest.

The girl was completely unstrung. Since Charles had brought her news, which, after all, had been merely a corroboration, her nerves had played her false ; the balance of her mind was thrown out of poise ; and the fact that she was there at all seemed only a part of her failing, an additional proof of her moral collapse.

Seated on a low ottoman, in a little recess among the tall palms and tree-ferns, which lined the passage leading from the ball-room to the studio, she was startled presently from her reverie by Mrs. Lightmark, who confronted her, a

dainty figure in the pale rose colour and apple-green of one of Watteau's most unpractical shepherdesses.

'Not dancing, Mary!' she protested, smiling a little languidly. 'What does it mean? Why are you sitting in stately solitude with such an evident contempt for our frivolity?'

'Frivolity!' echoed Miss Masters. 'I *have* been dancing, this last waltz, with Lord Overstock. I have sent him to find my fan. I told him exactly where to look, but I suppose he can't discover it. He's not very clever, you know!'

'Poor Lord Overstock! I hope he won't find it just yet and come to turn me out of his seat. I'm *so* tired of standing, of introducing men whose names I never knew to girls whose names I have forgotten, and of trying to avoid introducing the same people twice over. It's

so difficult to recognise people in their powder and patches !'

'Yes,' said Mary slowly, with a kind of inward resentment which she could not subdue, although she felt that it was unreasonable ; ' I almost wonder that you recognised me.'

Eve glanced at her, struck by her tone, trying to read her expression in the dim light, a shadow of bewilderment passing over her own face and for a moment lowering the brilliancy of her eyes. Then she smiled again, dismissing her thought with a little laugh which broke off abruptly.

'One so soon forgets !' the other added, with an intention in her voice, an involuntary betrayal which she almost immediately regretted.

'Forgets !'

Eve caught up the word eagerly, almost

passionately, her voice falling into a lower key.

‘Forget! Forgive and forget!’ repeated Mary quickly and recklessly, letting her eyes wander from her own clasped hands to Eve’s bouquet of delicate, scentless fritillaries, which lay neglected where it had fallen, on the floor between their feet. ‘How easy it sounds!—is perhaps—and yet—I have not so much to forget—or to be forgiven!’

The last words were almost whispered, but for Eve’s imagination, poised on tiptoe like a hunted creature blindly listening for the approach of the pursuer, they were full of suggestion, of denunciation.

She remembered now, with a swiftly banished pang of jealousy, that this girl had loved him.

Her thought sped back to a summer evening nearly a year ago, when it had

seemed to her that she had surprised her friend's secret.

‘What do you mean, Mary?’ she demanded courageously. ‘What have I to be forgiven? Don’t despise me; don’t, for heaven’s sake, don’t play with me! I am all in the dark! Are you accusing me? Do you think because I say nothing that I have forgotten—that I can forget? Is it something about—him?’

Mary cast a rapid glance at her.

‘Are you afraid of his name, then?’

Eve dropped her hands despairingly.

‘Ah, you do! You *are* playing with me! About Philip Rainham, then! For heaven’s sake speak! Do you know what I only guess—that he was innocent? For God’s sake say it!’

It was Mary’s turn to look bewildered, to feel penitent. She began to recognise that there were greater depths in Eve’s

nature than she had suspected, that her indifference might, after all, prove to have been merely a mask.

‘ You guess—innocent—don’t you know, then ?’

‘ Nothing, nothing ! I only suspect—believe ! I have been groping alone in the darkness—and yet I *do* know ! He was innocent—he played a part ?’

‘ Yes,’ said Mary gently ; ‘ he sacrificed himself, for another !’

‘ He sacrificed himself—for me. Ah, say it ! say it !’

Mary was greatly puzzled and at the same time moved—filled with a supreme compassion for this woman who was yet such a child, so dainty and frail a thing to confront the deadly knowledge that she had made a shipwreck of a life, of lives.

And yet, was there not also a ring of exultation, a challenge in her last words ?

At least, her sorrow was ennobled. She was invested with a sombre glory, as one who had inspired a rare and perfect devotion.

And, after all, had she not already been considered enough?

A silence ensued, during which Eve seemed to be wrapped in steadfast thought.

She grew calmer, picking up her bouquet, and sedulously arranging its disordered foliage; while Lord Overstock, who had arrived with Mary's fan, poured forth elaborate apologies, protesting that she must give him another dance—the second extra—to make up for the time he had lost.

Already the music was beginning for the next dance, and people passed in couples, laughing and talking gaily, a motley procession, on their way into the ball-room.

‘I thought your brother would have told you,’ said Mary softly, bending over her programme and gathering her skirts together with a suggestion of departure.

‘Charles? He was always prejudiced against him—always his enemy!’

‘That is why; he is very just, very conscientious. He told me this afternoon.’

Mary’s voice sank a little lower. She was standing now. She could see her prospective partner looking for her. She wondered vaguely whether Eve accepted the alternative, whether she realized that, to prove Philip innocent, was to establish her husband’s guilt, his original wrongdoing, and subsequent cowardice.

‘But—Charles! How did he know? Does he believe it? Who told him?’

Mary had gently disengaged her arm from Eve’s restraining hand. She stepped

back for an instant, excusing herself to her expectant cavalier.

‘One of Philip’s friends told him to-day—proved it to him, he says. It was a Mr. Oswyn.’

A minute later Mary found herself in the ball-room, making heroic efforts to divide her entire attention impartially between the strains of the band and the remarks of her partner.

She was afraid to pass in review the conduct of those few minutes which had seemed so long. Had it really all occurred in the interval between two waltzes?

For the present she drew a mental curtain over the scene. She lacked the courage to gaze upon her handiwork, although she was not without a hopeful instinct that, when she criticised it in sober daylight, she would even approve of what she had done. Her determination did not,

however, carry her further than the middle of the dance.

The room was now crowded to repletion, and she readily fell in with her partner's suggestion that they should take a turn in the cooler atmosphere of the garden ; and as she passed the threshold, a rapid, retrospective glance informed her that Eve was once more playing her arduous part of hostess.

Never had actress more anxiously awaited the fall of the curtain upon her scene. Her husband, in the gallant russet of a falconer, was dancing now with Mrs. Dollond : she could hear his frequent laughter, and, though she turned her eyes away, see him bending over his partner to catch the words, trivial enough no doubt, which she seemed to whisper with such an air of confidence. But, though she had heard him address Mrs. Dollond

by her Christian name, she did not pay him the compliment of being jealous: the time for that had passed. The account which she had to demand of him related to a matter far more serious than the most flagrant of flirtations—she only longed to confront him, to tear from him a confession, not so much with a view to humiliate him as to enlighten herself, and to force him to make the only reparation in his power.

When the music had ceased, and the measured tread of feet lapsed into the confusion of independent wanderings, Eve turned to find her husband close behind her, and Mrs. Dollond firing off a neat little speech of congratulation, panting a little, and making play with her elaborate fan.

She was quick to seize the opportunity for which she had waited so eagerly; with

a few words of smiling apology to Mrs. Dollond and the others who were gathered round her, she intimated to her husband that she wished him to come with her, to attend to something: she assumed a playful air of mystery.

‘Oh, you must go!’ said Mrs. Dollond, ‘your wife is planning some delightful surprise for us: I can see it in her eyes! Though, what one could want more——’

The music began again, and the couples took their places for the Lancers: there was to be a Shakespearian set, and another of Waverley notabilities.

Under cover of the discussion and confusion which this scheme involved, Eve withdrew, leading the way into the room which they called the library, and which was full of superfluous furniture, removed from the drawing-room to make space for the dancers. Her husband followed, lift-

ing his eyebrows, with a chivalrous but not wholly successful attempt to disguise his impatience.

When he had closed the door, Eve turned suddenly and confronted him, interrupting the question which was on his lips. He noticed, with a quick apprehension, that she was very pale, that the smile which she had worn for her guests had given place to an expression even more ominous than her pallor and the trembling of her lips.

‘Why have I brought you here?’ she echoed. ‘I don’t know, I might have asked you before them all—perhaps you would have preferred that! But I won’t keep you long. The truth! That is all I want!’

He frowned, with a vicious movement of his lips: then meeting her gaze, made an awkward effort to seem at ease.

‘My dear child!’ he said, stepping back and leaning his back against the door, ‘what melodrama! The truth! what truth?’

‘How often you must have withheld it from me, to ask like that! The truth about Philip Rainham and that woman: that is what I ask!’

Lightmark exclaimed petulantly at this:

‘Haven’t we discussed it all before? Haven’t you questioned me beyond all limits? Haven’t you said that you believed me? And what a time——’

‘Yes, I have asked you before. Is it my fault that you have lied? Is it my fault that you have made it possible for—for someone else to prove to me, to-night, that you have deceived me? The time is not of my making. But now, I must have the truth; it is the only reparation, the last thing I shall ask of you!’

‘You must be mad!’ he stammered, his self-possession deserting him; ‘you don’t know—you have no right to speak to me like this. You don’t understand these things; you must let me judge for you——’

‘The only thing I understand clearly is that you have blackened another man’s—your friend’s—memory. Isn’t that enough? Can you deny that you have allowed him to bear your shame? I know now that he was innocent; I insist that you shall tell me the rest!’

‘The rest!’ he repeated impatiently, shifting his attitude. ‘I won’t submit to this cross-examination! I have explained it all before; I decline to say any more!’

‘Then you cling to your lie?’

‘Lie? Pray, don’t be so sensational; you talk like the heroine of a fifth-rate drama! Who has put such a mad idea

into your head? Let me warn you that there are limits to my patience!

‘I will tell you, if you will come with me and deny it to his face—if you will refute his proofs.’

‘Proofs! You have no right to ask such a thing! I tell you, I have acted for the best. Why should you believe the first comer rather than me?’

‘Why? You can ask why!’ she interposed.

‘Let me beg of you to come back with me to our guests; we shall be missed—people will talk!’

Eve shrugged her shoulders defiantly, ironically.

‘You prevaricate; you won’t, you can’t be candid! There is only one other man who can tell me the truth—you make it necessary, I must go to him.’

Lightmark clenched his hand viciously upon the handle of the door.

‘I decline to discuss this damnable folly any longer; if you won’t come with me I shall go alone; I shall say that you are ill—really, I think you must be!’

‘Go by all means!’ she replied indifferently, ‘but tell me first, where can I find Mr. Oswyn?’

He paused, gazing at her blankly.

‘Oswyn?’

‘Yes. The man who is not afraid to denounce you. If you won’t enlighten me, if you won’t clear your—your friend’s memory—it may be at the expense of your own—perhaps he will.’

‘Oswyn!’ he stammered; ‘Oswyn!’

‘His address!’ she demanded quickly. ‘Please understand that for the future I am independent; I will go to him at once! If you won’t give me his address, if— Would you prefer that I should ask my brother for it? That is my alternative!’

Lightmark found something very disconcerting in his wife's steadfast gaze, in the uncompromising calm, the quiet passion of her demeanour; his one desire was to put an end to this scene, which oppressed him as a nightmare, before he should entirely lose all power of self-control.

He felt himself almost incapable of thought, unable to weigh the meaning of her words, her threats; the readiness of resource which served him so deftly in little things had deserted him now, as it invariably did in the face of a real emergency.

If he could temporize, he might be able to arrive at something more like a plan of action, to concentrate his efforts in one direction.

He realized that if his wife fulfilled her threat, which was the more alarming in

that it was not an angry one but had every appearance of being backed by deliberate intention—if she appealed to her brother, whose moral principles he estimated more highly than his tact or worldly wisdom—there appeared to be every prospect of an aggravated scandal. For if Charles Sylvester (who was unfortunately among the revellers) declined to furnish his sister with Oswyn's address, was it not certain that she would apply elsewhere? And, after all, might not Oswyn adhere to the silence which he had so long maintained?

He reasoned quickly and indeterminately, vaguely skimming the surface of many ominous probabilities and finding no hopeful resting-place for conjecture, finally allowing a little desperate gesture to escape him.

The music had stopped amid the

desultory clapping of hands, and he could hear people passing outside on their way into the garden. He turned the handle slowly without opening the door.

‘Be reasonable!’ he appealed. ‘There is still time; let us go into the ballroom; let us forget this folly!’

‘You may go,’ she replied contemptuously; ‘I have no wish to detain you—far from it. But if you leave me without giving me Mr. Oswyn’s address I shall ask Charles for it, and if Charles——’

Her husband interrupted her savagely.

‘Oh, if you are bent on making a fool of yourself, I suppose I can’t prevent you. The man lives at 61, Frith Street. Now you have it. I wash my hands of the whole affair.’

He opened the door, and she passed out gravely before him, holding her

bouquet to her down-turned face ; and then they parted tacitly, the husband turning towards the door which led into the garden, the wife making her way into the ball-room, and thence towards the studio.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN the empty studio, from which, for one night, most of her husband's impedimenta had been removed to allow place for the long supper-table, which glistened faintly in the pale electric light, she paused only long enough to wrap her fantastic person in a dark cloak which she had caught up on her way.

Then she let herself out quietly by the private door into the road. And she stood still a moment, blotted against the shadows, hesitating, vaguely considering her next step.

The honey-coloured moon, casting its

strange, silken glamour over the white house, over the black outline of the trees in the garden, spangled here and there with Japanese lanterns, gave an air of immense unreality to the scene; and the tremulous notes of the violins, which floated faintly down to her from the half-opened windows of the ball-room, only heightened this effect, seeming just then to be no more than the music of moonbeams to which the fairies dance.

For a moment a sudden weakness and timidity overcame her. In a world so transcendently unreal—had not she just seen her happiness become the very dream of a shadow?—was it not the merest futility to take a step so definite, to be passionate or intense? Better rather to rest for a little in this vague world of half-lights into which she had stepped, under the cooling stars, and then to

return and take up one's old place in the masque.

But her fantasy passed. In the distance two glowing orbs of a hansom came slowly towards her, and her purpose grew suddenly very strong.

The man reined in his horse with an inquiring glance at the hooded figure on the pavement, seeking a fare. And it was without hesitation that she engaged him, giving him the number of Oswyn's house in Frith Street, Soho, in her calm, well-bred voice, and bidding him be quick.

But the horse was incapable — tired, perhaps (she recalled the fact long afterwards, and the very shape and colour of the bony, ill-groomed animal, as one remembers trivial details upon occasions of great import); and after awhile she resigned herself to a tedious drive.

As they rattled along confusedly through

the crowded streets, she caught from time to time the reflection of her own face in the two little mirrors at each side, and wondered to find herself the same. For she did not deceive herself, nor undervalue the crushing force of the blow which she had received.

To her husband, when she turned scornfully from his clumsy evasions—for a moment, perhaps, to herself—she had justified the singular course she was taking by an overwhelming necessity of immediately facing the truth, in which, perhaps, there still lurked the dim possibility of explanation whereby her husband's villainess might find the shadow of an excuse.

But with further reflection—and she was reflecting with passionate intensity—this little glowworm of hope expired. The truth! She knew it already—had known

before, almost instinctively—that Philip Rainham's justification could only be the warrant of her husband's guilt; no corroboration of Oswyn's could make that dreary fact any plainer than it was already.

No, it was hardly the truth which she desired so much as an act of tardy expiation which she would make. For with the bitterness of her conviction that, for all her wealth, and her beauty, and her youth, she had, none the less, irretrievably thrown away her life, there mingled an immense contrition at having been so blind and hard, so culpably unjust to the most generous of men, who had deliberately effaced himself for her good.

And the exceeding bitterness of her self-reproach, which alone saved her composure, forbidding the mockery of tears, was only exaggerated when she remem-

bered how vain her remorse must remain. It mattered no jot that she was sorry, since death had sealed their estrangement ironically for all time.

In her passionate recognition of his constant justice and kindness, which of old, vainly striving to perpetuate the fading illusion of her husband's honour (her generosity did not pause to remember how vain these efforts had been), she had discounted for hypocrisy, she felt that no price of personal suffering would have been too heavy if only for one hour, one moment, she could have recalled him from the world of shadows to her side.

She could figure to herself, refining on her misery, his attitude in such a case : the half sad, half jesting reassurance of his gravely pardoning eyes.

They haunted her just then, those eyes of Philip Rainham, which had been to the

last so ambiguous and so sad, and were now perpetually closed.

And for the first time a suspicion flashed across her mind, which, while it made her heart flutter like a frightened bird, seemed to her the one drop hitherto lacking in the cup of her unhappiness. Had, then, after all, that gentle indifference of her friend masked an immense hunger, a deeply-felt need of personal tenderness, which she might have supplied—ah, how gladly!—if she had known? Could he have cared more deeply than people knew?

She reminded herself the next moment, as they came to a sudden standstill before a dark-green door, how idle all such questions were—vain beating of the hands against the shut door of death!

She alighted and dismissed her cab, and in the interval which elapsed before her ring was answered by a slovenly little ser-

vant, who gaped visibly at the lady's hurried request that her name should be taken up to Mr. Oswyn, she had leisure for the first time to realize the strangeness of her course.

Her mother, Charles, her guests—Felicia Dollond and the rest—how would they consider the adventure if ever they should know? It was easy to imagine their attitude of shocked disapproval, and her brother's disgusted repudiation of the whole business as a thing, most emphatically, which one did not do. Ah, no! it was not a departure such as this that a well-bred society Spartan could even decently contemplate! And it was almost with a laugh, devoid, indeed, of merriment, that Eve tossed consideration of these scruples contemptuously away.

At last she was in revolt against their world and the pedantry of its little in-

flexible laws ; and all her old traditions had become odious to her, seeming, for the moment, deeply tainted with dishonour, and partly the cause of her disastrous plight. A great, ruining wave had broken over her life, and in her passionate helplessness she cried only for some firm and absolute shore, else the silence of the engulfing waters, not for the vain ropes of social convention with which they would drag her back into the perilous security from which she had been swept ; and she had forgotten everything but her imperative need, which had brought her there, when the lodging-house drudge returned and ushered her clumsily into Oswyn's presence.

It was a sitting-room on the second floor which the artist occupied, by no means an uncomfortable apartment, though Eve's first impression of it was immeasurably

sordid, and she realized, with a touch of pity, that the painter's difficult genius had no tact of application to his surroundings.

Had, then, the painter of 'Thanatos, the Peacebearer'—that incomparable work!—no personal taste, to be violated by the crude wall-paper and the vulgar vases, containing impossible flowers, which jostled against broken tobacco-pipes and a half empty bottle of milk on the mantel-piece?

There was an immense untidiness everywhere; a disorder of children's toys and torn picture-books would have prepared Eve for the discovery of a sleeping child with brilliant hair coiled up in a rug on the sofa, if her eyes had not been arrested by an unframed canvas on an easel, the only picture, save some worthless prints in common gilt frames, which was visible.

It was the head of Philip Rainham, immortalized by the brush of his friend, which awaited her—the eyes already closed, the pale lips still smiling with that superbly ironical smile of the dead.

She had not greeted Oswyn on her entrance, and now she had ceased to remember that he was there, as she stood contemplating the portrait with her rapt and sorrowful gaze, while Oswyn, leaning across the table, implicitly accepting the situation, which had to him all the naturalness of the unexpected, considered her in his turn.

He had never before seen her to such advantage, and remembering that early presentment of her which Lightmark had exhibited in the Grosvenor, he realized how much she had developed. The singular nobility and purity of her beauty amazed him; it shone out like the starry

night; and, standing there remote and silent (in her abstraction she had let her cloak slide to the ground, revealing her white arms, her fanciful, incongruous attire), she seemed, indeed, a creature of another world.

When she turned to him at last there was an immense and solemn entreaty in her eyes for candour and directness, an appeal to be spared no bitter knowledge that he might possess—for the whole truth.

‘Tell me,’ she began slowly, calmly, though he was not ignorant that her composure was the result of an immense inward effort. ‘I can’t explain why I have come to you—perhaps you yourself can explain that better than I! I don’t know what you may think of me—I am too unhappy to care. I have no claim upon you. I only entreat you to answer me a question

which perhaps no one now living can answer but you. Ah!'—she broke off with a gesture of sudden passion—'I have been so cruelly kept in the dark.'

Oswyn lowered his eyes for a moment, considering. A curious wave of reminiscence swept over him, giving to this strange juxtaposition the last touch of completion.

He remembered Rainham's long reticence, and his unburdening himself at the last, in a conviction that there would be a season when the truth would be best. And he said to himself that this time had come.

'Mrs. Lightmark,' he said at last, in a low, constrained voice, 'I promise to answer any question that is within my knowledge.'

'It is about my—my husband and Philip Rainham. What passed between them in

the autumn of last year? Who was that woman?’

He did not reply for a moment; but unconsciously his eyes met hers full, and in their brief encounter it was possible that many truths were silently told. Presently she continued :

‘ You need not tell me, Mr. Oswyn. I can see your answer as plainly as if you had spoken. It is my husband——’

She broke off sharply, let her beautiful head droop with a movement of deep prostration upon her hands.

‘ What have I done, what have I done,’ she moaned, ‘ that this dishonour should come to me ?’

It was a long time before she looked up at him.

‘ Why did he do it ?’ she whispered.

‘ Have you never guessed ?’ he asked in his turn. ‘ I will tell you, Mrs. Lightmark.

I was with him when he was dying. He wished you to know; he had some such time as this in his mind. It was a sort of message.'

'He wished me to know—a sort of message,' she repeated blankly. 'He spoke of me, then—he forgave me for my hard judgment, for knowing him so ill?'

'It was himself that he did not forgive for not having guarded you better, for having been deceived by your husband. He spoke of you to me very fully at the last, when we both saw that his death was merely a question of days. I saw then what I had sometimes suspected before, that you had absorbed his whole life, that his devotion to you was a kind of religion.'

'He loved me?' she asked at last, in a hushed, strange voice, white to the lips.

Oswyn bowed his head.

‘Ever since you were a child. It was very beautiful, and it was with him at the last as a light. Don’t reproach yourself; it was to prevent that that he wished you to be told.’

‘To prevent it!’ she cried, with tragical scorn. ‘Am I not to reproach myself that I was hard and callous and cold, that I never understood nor cared; that I was not with him? Not reproach myself? Oh, Philip, Philip!’ she called, breaking down utterly, laying her face in her hands.

Oswyn averted his eyes, giving her passion time to appease itself. When he glanced at her again, she had gathered her cloak round her and was standing by the picture, from which she seemed loath to remove her eyes.

‘You gave him great happiness,’ he

suggested gently, 'in the only manner in which it was possible. Remember only that. He must in any case have died.'

He imagined that she hardly heard him, absorbed in the desolation of her own thought; and when she turned to him again, quite ready for departure now, he saw by the hard light in her eyes that she had recurred to her husband, to the irreparable gulf which must henceforth divide them.

'I can't go back to him,' she whispered, as if she communed with herself. 'I hate him; yes, I hate him, with my whole soul. He has lied to me too much; he has made me do such a cruel wrong. There are things which one can't forgive. Ah, no! it's not possible.'

Oswyn viewed her compassionately, while a somewhat bitter smile played about his mouth.

‘No, you will go back, Mrs. Lightmark! Forgive me,’ he added, raising his hand, interrupting her, as she seemed on the point of speech. ‘I don’t want to intrude on you—on your thoughts, with advice or consolation. They are articles I don’t deal in. Only I will tell you—I who know—that in revolt also there is vanity. You are bruised and broken and disillusioned, and you want to hide away from the world and escape into yourself, or from yourself; it’s all the same. Ah, Mrs. Lightmark, believe me, in life that is not possible, or where it is most possible, is in a crowd. Go back to your guests; I know, you see, whence you come; take up your part in the play, the masque; be ready with your cues. It’s all masks and dominoes; what does the form or colour of it matter? Underneath it all you are yourself, with

your beautiful sorrow, your memories, your transcendent happiness—nothing can touch that ; what does it matter ?’

‘Happiness!’ she ejaculated, rather in wonder than in scorn, for in spite of her great weariness she had been struck by the genuine accent struggling through his half ironical speech.

‘Most happy,’ he said, with a deep inhalation. ‘Haven’t you an ideal which life, with its cruelties, its grossness, can never touch ?’

Then he added quickly, in words of Philip Rainham, which had flashed with sudden appositeness across his mind :

‘Your misery has its compensation ; you have been wronged, but you have also been loved.’

‘Ah, my friend!’ she cried, turning toward the picture with a new and more

beautiful illumination in her eyes, 'was it for this that you did it?'

Oswyn said nothing, and Eve moved towards the door, discovering for the first time, on her way, the sleeping child. She stopped for a moment, and the other watched her with breathless curiosity, uncertain how far her knowledge might extend.

And as she stood there, wondering, a great wave of colour suffused her white face; the next moment she was gone, but in the light of that pure blush Oswyn seemed to have discovered that her tragical enlightenment was complete.

When she turned once more into the street, she had already set herself gravely, with a strange and factitious composure, to face her life. It stretched itself out before her like a great, gray plain, the arid desolation of the road being rendered

only more terrible by the flowers with which it would be strown. For suddenly, while Oswyn had been speaking, she had recognised that after all she would go back; the other course had been merely the first bitter cry, half hysterical, of her grief.

By her husband's side, with the semblance of amity between them still, utterly apart and estranged as they must in reality henceforth perpetually be, it seemed to her that she could none the less religiously cherish the memory of her friend because she would turn a smiling mask to the world's indifference, wearing mourning in her heart. And deeply as she had suffered, in the midst of her remorse she could still remind herself that in the last half hour she had gained more than she had lost; that life, however tedious it

might be, was in a manner consecrated by this great devotion, which death had embalmed, to be a light to her in lonely places and dark hours, a perpetual after-thought against the cynicism or despair to which her imitation of happiness might conduce.

The mask of a smile, and mourning in her heart! Yes, it was in some such phrase as that that life which began then for her must be expressed—for her, and perhaps, she reflected sadly, for others, for many, the justest and the best.

And in the meantime she would go back to her dancers, resume once more her well worn *rôle* of the brilliant and efficient hostess. She wondered if it would be difficult to account for herself, to explain an absence so unprecedented, if, as was doubtless the case, her figure had been

missed. But the next moment she smiled a trifle bitterly, for she had reminded herself of her husband's proved facility of prevarication, which she felt certain would already have been usefully employed.

THE END.

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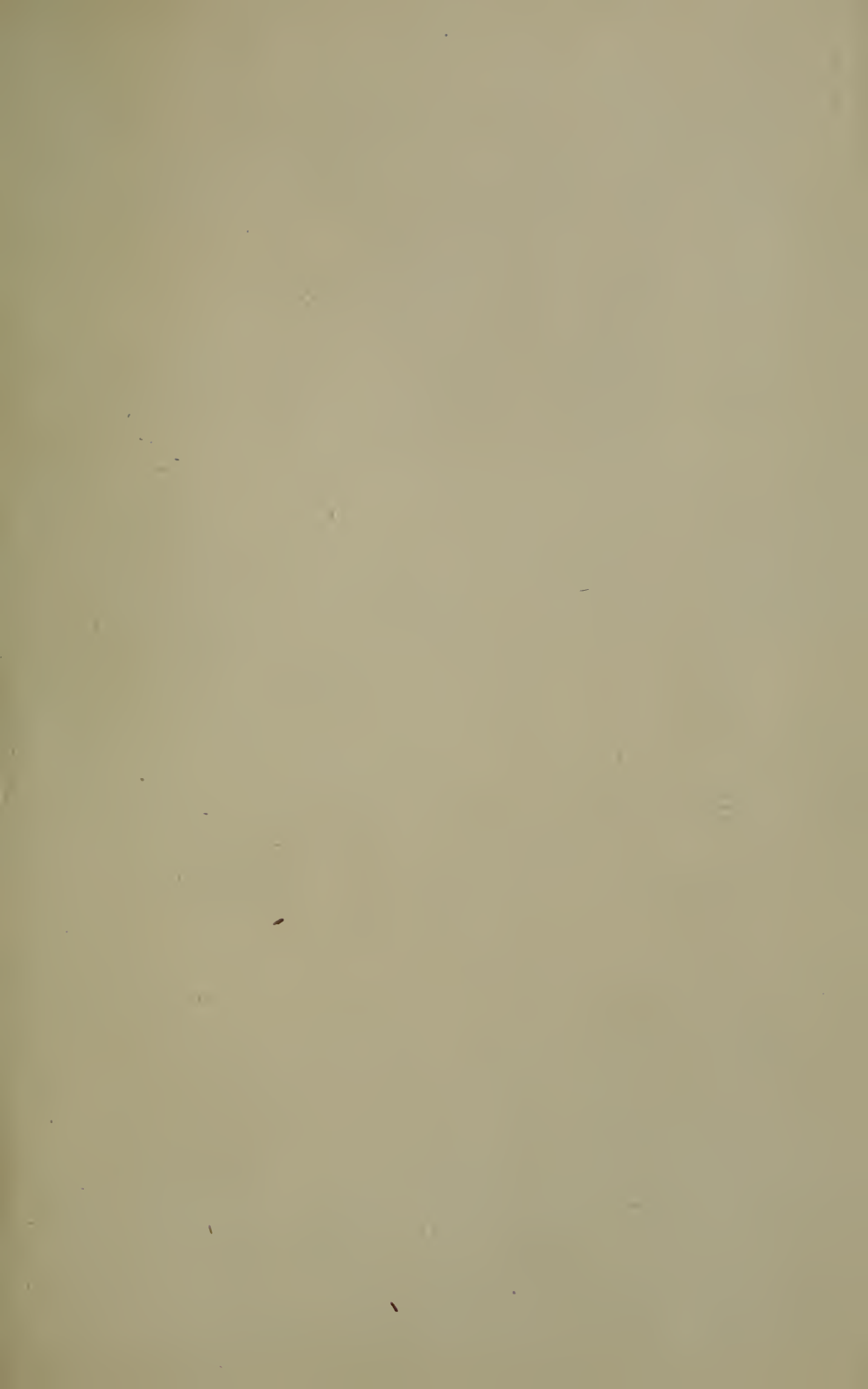
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